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LILLA

MRS. BELLOC LOWNDES

Cottage Club
1917

Lowndes
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LILLA: A PART OF HER LIFE

MRS. BELLOC LOWNDES

LILLA: A PART OF HER LIFE

Marie Adelaide

By MRS. BELLOC LOWNDES

Author of
"Good Old Anna," "The Chink in the Armour," etc., etc.

*"Qui de nous n'a en sa terre promise, son
jour d'extase, et sa fin en exil?"*

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PROLOGUE

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LILLA: A PART OF HER LIFE

PROLOGUE

I

IT was the afternoon of October 2nd, 1914, and Robert Singleton's nearest and dearest were all gathered together in old Mrs. Singleton's drawing-room at 19, FitzClarence Crescent, Regent's Park.

They were there to meet a certain Corporal Pilcher who had been, as far as was yet known, the last Englishman to see Singleton after he had been wounded, some six weeks ago, in Flanders.

Robert's wife, Lilla, sat on a low, straight-backed chair, rather apart from the others. There was a piteous look of strain on her small, sensitive face, and her large eyes were misty with pain.

Cecil Sturges had been vividly aware of Lilla's presence, and of how she looked, from the moment he had been shown into the room. Although he had been asked to be present on this painful occasion because he was Robert Singleton's oldest and closest friend, he knew that the other people there all regarded him as being also, in a special sense, the friend of Robert's wife, and this made him feel just a little uncomfortable. It was true that he was attached to "Mrs. Robert," and that he had always taken her part with the Singleton family; still he was a just man, and deeply sorry though he was for poor Lilla, he was more sorry for Mrs. Singleton, Robert's mother. He knew that to the hard, stern-visaged, old woman now sitting nearly opposite to him, her son had been everything.

As to the other four people who were present, Robert's two sisters and their respective husbands, they were in a very different category of mourners, if mourners they were.

Sturges glanced at the gilt and green ormolu clock ticking loudly on the mid-Victorian, velvet-draped mantelpiece. It wanted seven minutes to three. Sturges was not a nervous, or, in any special sense, an imaginative man, but the silence began to affect him disagreeably. He looked across at Mrs. Singleton. She was sitting straight up in her high armchair, and her set face, of which the habitual colour was that peculiar ashen hue which is supposed to indicate heart trouble, was flushed. On a round, mother-of-pearl inlaid table, which had been placed close to where she sat, there lay, open, a telegram.

"Is that the telegram?" he asked at last, leaning a little forward. "If so, may I read it?"

Mrs. Singleton took it off the table, and with her claw-like, blue-veined hand, held it out to him.

"Regret to inform you that Captain Robert Singleton, 3rd Battalion Bugle Brigade, was reported wounded and missing on the 26th of August.

"SECRETARY,
"War Office."

Cecil Sturges read the telegram twice over. Then he handed it back to Mrs. Singleton in silence, and in silence she put it back on the toy-like table by her side.

This man, whom she regarded as still quite a young man, though he was now over forty, had been her son's greatest friend and, from Mrs. Singleton's point of view, the more commendable a friend inasmuch as theirs was a hereditary friendship. She herself had been intimate, in a stiff, old-fashioned way, with Cecil Sturges' father and mother, and from early boyhood he had come often in and out of her house. But only in these last four terrible weeks had she felt how strong and how real was the tie between herself and this younger man. He had written to her many feeling, if short, letters, since the tragic news had reached him.

Sturges was a civil servant, his office being the Board of Works. He had been away on a holiday, convalescing from a bad attack of scarlet fever, when war had broken out, and there had been no apparent reason why he should come back before his due time. And while he was still on the banks of Windermere, all that was going on in London during that August and September, to say nothing of what was happening in Flanders and in France, had seemed so remote as to be scarcely true.

Immediately on the declaration of war Robert Singleton had rejoined the regiment with which he had been, as a subaltern, through the last half of the South African War, and, as soon as he knew he was under orders for abroad, he had written Sturges a short, hurried note asking his friend "to look after Lilla a bit," on his return to town. He had added, "From what I can hear, we are up against a bigger thing than we perhaps quite realise, as yet." That phrase had been rather like Robert—Robert was a simple, modest sort of chap, when it came to the big things of life.

Sturges was very glad, now, that he had come back two days before he was due at the office. But for this he would not have been able to be here this afternoon, gathered together with the others in the drawing-room of Number 19, as they all called Mrs. Singleton's house.

With a mingled feeling of surprise and of curiosity his eyes wandered over the rest of the little company. Closest to himself was Jenny Temple, Robert's younger sister, and next to her was her husband, James Temple.

Cecil Sturges wondered how the war was affecting Temple. Temple was managing director of the important old-established firm from which the large Singleton fortune was derived. The firm dealt in that unfamiliar mineral manganese, and in the old days, which even now seemed long ago, they had done the bulk of their business with Germany.

Sturges decided that the firm was probably severely hit, for Temple looked gloomy and sulky, instead of pompous and prosperous, as he usually looked. He was nearly twenty years older than his wife, a man of heavy build, and, though well preserved, he looked what he was—over fifty. The whole weight of the Singleton business rested on his broad shoulders. He knew himself to be responsible only to Mrs. Singleton, his wife's mother. Easy-going Robert had been proud of the fine old firm, but his directorship was a purely nominal affair and he only went to the office when he had nothing better to do.

Mrs. Temple was a decidedly pretty woman, with a good, if rather plump figure, light brown hair, and a pink-and-white skin. She still had her usual composed, self-satisfied expression.

Sturges had never liked her. He thought her stupid, and knew her to have been, on at least one occasion, a mischief-maker. She had, however, a certain physical resemblance to her brother Robert, and, of the two daughters, she was her mother's favourite.

Sitting over by old Mrs. Singleton was Louisa Lark-Wright, Robert's elder sister. She had once been very handsome, but with youth had gone all trace of beauty, and she was now a dark, thin, weather-beaten-looking woman, with something of her mother's manner and bearing. It was Louisa—so Sturges had learnt—who had been to a great deal of trouble to gain some definite information as to what had really taken place on that fatal 26th of August. She had bravely gone to the War Office herself, and interviewed there a courteous official, who had promised that a very special effort should be made to find out what had happened to her brother. And, as a matter of fact, it was through this official that they had heard, unofficially, of the soldier who was coming here this afternoon.

Philip Lark-Wright sat near his wife. He was a golden-haired, good-looking, nervous man, with a long moustache at which he often tugged. His business, as James Temple would have called it, was that of a fairly successful portrait-painter. The Singletons, as a clan, had much disapproved of Louisa's marriage. Even Philip's curious double name was against him. It sounded so much less respectable, so—so—theatrical, compared to the solid name of Singleton. But Louisa had had her way, and once the marriage had taken place, her relations of course accepted Lark-Wright as one of themselves, though they still rather looked down on him. They did not think portrait painting was work for a man, and Lark-Wright's income was apt to be fluctuating. Both Philip and Louisa, in their very different ways, were fonder of Robert's wife, Lilla, than were the Temples.

While Robert and Lilla were engaged, Philip Lark-Wright had done a very charming pastel portrait of Lilla which, when exhibited, had had quite a success, and brought the artist several commissions. It was a brilliant little bit of work, and in its composition three mirrors had been cleverly utilised to show, from varying angles, the delicate and fragrant-looking beauty of the sitter. But the portrait had not pleased either Robert Singleton or his mother, and in the end it had passed into the possession of Cecil Sturges.

Cecil had come in one day when Robert and old Mrs. Singleton were discussing, not so much where to hang the pastel, as where not to hang it, and at last he had observed: "As none of you like it, why don't you lend the picture to *me?*" And there and then, Lilla not being consulted at all, he had carried it off, and it had hung over the writing-table in his bachelor sitting-room, ever since.

And now to-day, Sturges visualised the charming portrait at which he so often glanced, during the little time of each day he spent in his rooms.

There was at once a great likeness, and a painful unlikeness, between that pictured Lilla and the Lilla who was sitting there in front of him, now. She must be—Sturges hesitated, and began looking back in his mind—yes, she must be nearly twelve years younger than Robert—that is twenty-nine last March. But she looked younger than her age. Lilla was small and fragile, with the fair *cendré* hair which prolongs youth, and her deep blue eyes were beautiful. But the look of lilting joy, and of elfish charm, which had been so cleverly conveyed in Philip Lark-Wright's pastel, had been evanescent.

And then, suddenly, Cecil Sturges became aware of something about Lilla which struck him as rather strange. The other three women were all in black, almost in a kind of modified mourning. But Lilla was wearing a blue serge skirt, and a blouse made of some thin, flimsy material of a kind that neither of her sisters-in-law would have thought of wearing. The blouse was fastened down the front with little crystal buttons which had caught his eye. He would have been very much surprised had he known that that blue skirt and the diaphanous-looking blouse had been put on in defiance, as it were, of old Mrs. Singleton. Lilla, who was so very seldom defiant, and who for so long had been little more than a cypher in this house, had so far asserted herself during the last four weeks as to declare it to be her conviction that Robert was alive and a prisoner.

Across the stillness of that early October afternoon there suddenly fell the sound for which they had all been waiting. It was a queer, hesitating, and yet loud rat-at-tat-tat, on the big knocker of the front door.

Lilla started violently—so violently indeed that it made the low chair on which she was sitting creak—and those about her looked across to where she was sitting, and over the faces of five out of the six there swept looks of surprise and of slight uneasiness. Till that moment they had been scarcely aware of Lilla's presence. Without being exactly an unsatisfactory wife to Robert, she had never become a true Singleton, and just now she seemed to be less one of themselves than ever.

The door opened, and Mrs. Singleton's parlour-maid, a woman named Bartlett who had been with her over twenty years, announced in a tone of suppressed excitement, "Corporal Pilcher, ma'am," and then closed the door, with a long, lingering, slow movement, behind the soldier.

Corporal Pilcher was tall and gaunt, and as he moved forward uncertainly into the large light room, Cecil Sturges realised that the man's nerves were all ajar.

The soldier knew that Captain Singleton was married, and he looked about him uneasily, wondering which of the younger ladies present was the Captain's wife.

Old Mrs. Singleton stood up for a moment. "Would you like to sit down?" she asked stiffly.

"No, thank you, madam, I would rather stand." And he came a step or two nearer to her, and took up his station on the hearthrug.

She handed him the telegram. "We received this telegram on the 2nd of September," she said.

He read it through carefully, then handed it back to her with the words: "Quite correct."

There followed a painful pause. Twice Corporal

Pilcher cleared his throat, opened his large mouth, and then shut it again.

James Temple told himself that the time had come for him to take a hand; women always mismanage this kind of thing! "We may presume, I suppose, that the information contained in that telegram was largely based on a report made by you, Corporal Pilcher?"

"As to that I can't say, sir."

Mrs. Singleton was the next to speak: "You were, I believe, the last person who saw or spoke to my son?"

The soldier wheeled round, and his voice softened: "Yes, madam, that is so—to the best of my belief, madam." Corporal Pilcher was very fond of his own old mother.

And then suddenly Lilla, who was sitting just opposite to where the soldier stood, asked him a question. "Could you tell us," she asked in her low, clear voice, "what exactly happened on August 26th? It is always better, isn't it, to begin at the beginning?"

They all looked at her, rather surprised at her interference, and yet—yet in answer to that gentle, quiet enquiry, the Corporal's lips were unloosed.

"Yes, miss, perhaps it would be best for me just to tell you all that happened from the beginning."

He drew a long breath, and looking straight down into her uplifted face, began his story, in a rapid, monotonous voice: "We marched out of our billets at four a.m.—that's in the morning—and went up to a place which, so I've heard since, was on the main Paris road. The village where we had been, you must understand, was what I should call half left on our rear, near this Le Catto," he turned round for a moment towards the oldest lady present, and she bent her head gravely. "Well, the Captain—Captain Singleton, that is—he says, 'We must clear all this out, men.' And so we did. It was a pretty kind of little garden when we began, but well, by the time we'd finished the job, got rid of all the garden stuff, the old parties as what it belonged to—a Darby and Joan sort o' pair—was dreadfully upset. But we couldn't help it, now could we? And 'twas only being a bit previous, as far as that poor little place was concerned. Besides, the Captain—he was always a generous gentleman—give them five golden French sovereigns. That cheered them up a bit, of course——"

Corporal Pilcher stopped for a moment to take breath, and then he again stared down at Lilla, whom he took to be a young, unmarried sister of Captain Singleton.

"We sat down and ate a bit, then dug some trenches, surface ones, so to speak—that took some time. And then—well, we'd hardly finished before it just fair started——"

"Do you mean the fighting—the battle?" It was Mrs. Lark-Wright who asked the question in a sharp, business-like tone. She thought the interview with this man was being very stupidly managed, but something in her mother's rigid, suffering face held her back from taking matters into her own hands.

The Corporal turned round: "Yes, 'twas the fighting right enough, ma'am, but we couldn't see nothing."

He stopped, and they all looked at him with a closer attention.

" 'Twas all a-going on over our heads, so to speak—hours and hours of it. But o' course one loses count of time——" He looked deprecatingly round his little audience, and took a sudden, unreasoning dislike to Mr. Temple.

"At last they came on from behind a little wood where they'd been a-hiding o' themselves. We just steadied our rifles on the trench and let 'em advance to, well, say seven hundred yards. As for the first lot, they was simply blasted away to heaven—you take my meaning? Some said as what every bullet found two billets—but I don't know about that. Then it got dark—dark enough to see that the villages round, there were four of 'em, were on fire, and I did hear tell how the enemy that night shelled a hospital. The chaps on our left—the Royal Irish they were—was surprised, and fearfully cut up, so orders came to relieve them, as soon as possible. We crept out o' the trenches, and crossed to the other side of the road. We come to a ditch, and I think it must 'a been just there that—that——"

They all guessed what he was going to say, and Lilla leaned forward, instinctively.

"——that Captain Singleton, miss, must 'a been hit. But I can't say exactly, 'twould be a lie for me to say I can. Things were going pretty badly for us by then. Speaking for myself, I didn't believe one of us had a dog's chance of getting out o' there alive."

And then there rose in the still atmosphere of Mrs. Singleton's drawing-room the low, rather caressing voice of Philip Lark-Wright. "And what exactly were your own sensations, Corporal Pilcher?"

The soldier looked very steadily at the gentleman wearing that queer orange-coloured silk tie. "Well, sir, I reckon they was the reverse of cheerful."

"Then you cannot tell us what happened to my son? I thought you had some special information." There was a streak of bitter, almost intolerable, disappointment in Mrs. Singleton's hard voice.

He turned round. "In course I have, or I wouldn't be here, madam, a-telling you of all this. I was only trying to explain when I thought the Captain must 'a been hit. But it was a long time after that—well, not to put too fine a point upon it, it must 'a been close to midnight when I went back to the place, and came across, so to speak, Captain Singleton. I was groping along, afraid to strike a light, when, all on a sudden like, I heard the Captain's voice uprising from the ground, as it were——"

Lilla looked up, straight into Corporal Pilcher's face. "What did he say?" she asked breathlessly.

"He called out: 'I am a wounded British officer,' for he took me, you see, for one o' the enemy. I did strike a match then, regardless of danger, and I saw him lying just there, at my feet." He stared down on to the carpet, as if he visualised the recumbent, wounded officer lying there, and James Temple moved uncomfortably in his chair. He thought this a very painful, unnecessary business.

"The Captain was pretty bad. I didn't want no telling to see that. But still, when he saw it was me, his face brightened a bit. 'Why,' he says, quite pleasant-like, 'is that you, Corporal Pilcher? I thought it was a German. You'd better get out of this quick,' he says. And I says, 'Oh, no, sir. I'd like to help you a bit.' So then I managed to get him along, not very far, I'm afraid, but I reckon—well, I daresay it was as much as twenty yards. But you see, ma'am, he was pretty bad, he'd been hit in a lot of places, so he said; but I couldn't see much, for though he gave me his 'lectric torch, it had gone wrong. I've brought it to-day. I thought mebbe you'd like to have it.'' He took it, with a quick movement, out of his breeches pocket.

There ran a little stir through the people there. Somehow the sight of that weather-stained little roll of metal brought the scene that had just been described more vividly before each of them.

And then Corporal Pilcher went on, still holding the electric torch a little awkwardly in his hand, for no one, so far, had offered to relieve him of it.

"Well, there ain't much more to tell. We could hear talking, German talking, as well as, o' course, the dreadful moaning and groaning all around. The Captain, he says suddenly to me, 'Pilcher? Come a little closer, man. I don't want to shout.' But he couldn't 'a shouted, poor gentleman, not if he had wanted ever so—for he was weak, ma'am, from the loss of his blood. He whispers to me, 'Pilcher? You're all right, ain't you? You're unwounded, I mean?' And I says, 'Yes, sir, *I'm* all right.' And then he says to me, 'Well, you go along back quick, or they'll get you. I wouldn't like to be the cause of their taking you prisoner, Pilcher, a hale, unwounded man, of great value to the Company' (that's what he said, ma'am). 'I want you to be there when the regiment marches into Berlin,' he says. 'You leave me just here. I'll be all right!' And I says to him (By God, I swear I did!), 'I can't leave you like this, sir,' I says. And he says, 'Yes, you've got to leave me—that's what my orders to you are. You've got to go, and you'll have to be quick,' he says, 'quick, and very careful how you get along. But you're like me—eh, Pilcher?—you're an old campaigner.' And I says, 'Yes, sir, that is so,' for we'd both been through South Africa, as I thinks you know, madam. And then I says, 'Well, good-night, sir.' And he says, 'Good-night, Pilcher—and good luck,' he says."

"Have you any idea as to what was the nature of Captain Singleton's wounds?" asked James Temple gruffly.

"No, sir, I have not. 'Twould be a lie for me to make out that I have. But I can say that his arms were all right. I should say, sir—using my own judgment like—that he'd been hit in nine or ten places."

"Do you found that view on anything that Captain Singleton said to you?"

The whole business was getting on James Temple's nerves. This war was upsetting him more than he had thought anything could have upset him, unconnected with his business. Yet he took the greatest trouble to keep himself fit, and he made a point of golfing the whole of each Saturday and Sunday.

"Well, yes, sir, I have, in a manner of speaking——"

The Corporal turned apologetically to old Mrs. Singleton. "You see, madam, it takes a good bit longer to tell, than it did to happen, and we didn't say nothing while I was helping the Captain along—he crawling as it were, on his hands, pushing himself along like what you may have seen a baby do,

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miss——" he was now looking down into Lilla's upturned face again.

She nodded, without speaking. She quite understood what Corporal Pilcher meant, and her eyes slowly filled with tears.

"We must 'ope for the best," he said feelingly. "We must 'ope, miss, that is, that the Captain was picked up and taken into Leal. I saw a chap as escaped from there, and he said that at Leal the Germans were behaving quite decent-like to the wounded officers they had in 'orspital. So that's what we must 'ope for."

There was a general movement through the room. James Temple stood up, and the others followed his example. Mrs. Lark-Wright bent towards her mother and whispered to her, "Shall I give him a sovereign, mother—I mean a sovereign from you?"

"Certainly. If you think it's the right and proper thing to do."

"I think he expects something. You see, he brought back Robert's torch. Have you got your purse here, mother?"

Mrs. Singleton had never consented to give up pockets, and her hand slipped down to her full, unfashionable, black silk skirt. She drew out and opened her purse. She took out a gold piece and handed it to her daughter.

Mrs. Lark-Wright went up to the soldier. "Thank you very much," she said coldly. "We are very much obliged to you for coming and telling us what happened. Also for bringing back my poor brother's electric torch."

She pressed the sovereign into his hand, and then she made an impatient sign to her husband. They had heard all the man had to say, and the quicker they now got rid of him the better. But Lilla had sprung from her low chair, and had already opened the door for Corporal Pilcher. She followed him out on to the landing.

"My husband didn't say anything more? He didn't send any message?" she asked eagerly.

The soldier looked regretfully down into her face. "No, nothing more than what I said in there, miss—I should say ma'am." Corporal Pilcher found it hard to readjust his ideas; and just then the parlour-maid, Bartlett, appeared on the half-landing, half-way up the staircase. There was a resentful look on her stolid face. "The drawing-room bell rang," she said complainingly.

"It must have been rung to let Corporal Pilcher out"—Lilla held out her hand, and shook that of the man who had been, according to his lights, so good to Robert. "I hope," she said in a low voice, "that if ever you're in trouble, or want a—a friend, you will let me know." Then she ran upstairs, two flights up, to her own little sitting-room.

Somehow she thought it very likely that Cecil Sturges, whom she had not seen alone since he came back from his holiday, would ask to see her before he left the house.

It would be a great comfort to have a talk with him. Different as they were, she felt him to be, in a sort of way, a bit of Robert—like Robert, Cecil was calm, sensible, good-humoured. Lilla knew, too, that Cecil Sturges really cared for Robert. The people who had drifted in and out of the house during this past month had mostly been elderly people, friends and acquaintances of old Mrs. Singleton, whose interest in Lilla's husband lay only in the fact that he was his mother's son.

The minutes dragged slowly by. She wondered if she ought to have waited downstairs, in the room behind the dining-room—a dark, dingy room which was called the library, but which no one but Robert had ever used, and he only when he wanted to be alone with his pipe and a book.

Lilla felt restless, unnerved by the painful ordeal she had gone through, and so, after waiting a little longer, she went into her bedroom, and put on her hat. Then she took up a work-bag—she was already knitting socks for soldiers—and ran down stairs.

She stood and listened for a moment by the drawing-room door—but there came no murmur of voices from within. Then they had all gone, including Cecil Sturges? With a long, unconscious sigh, she descended yet another flight of stairs, and, stepping lightly through the hall, let herself very quietly out of the front door.

At once the outside air, edged to-day with a keen autumnal freshness, brought her an almost physical sense of relief and comfort. Crossing the road, she unlocked the gate into the Enclosure—that strip of the Regent's Park of which the use is reserved for the leaseholders of the houses opposite—and walked up the straight path leading to the lake.

II

Although Lilla had been at special pains to let herself out very quietly, the sound of the front door shutting behind her was heard in the drawing-room. And, hearing that sound, Mrs. Singleton got up from the chair where she had sat down, full of painful, agonising thoughts, after all the others had gone. With slow, deliberate steps, she walked across to the middle one of the three windows which overlooked the park.

It was as she had supposed. Her daughter-in-law had just left the house.

The woman standing by the window knew exactly what that other woman, at whom she was now gazing down with so curiously bitter an expression on her face, was about to do. As soon as Lilla had reached the end of the path leading from the gate, Lilla would drag out an iron chair, and, putting it as close to the water as was allowed, she would take out her knitting, and go on sitting there till five o'clock. Then she would come indoors again.

Mrs. Singleton told herself that if Robert's wife was an ordinary person, a commonplace, nice young woman like—like her Jenny, for instance—they two would by now have been talking over what that soldier had said, and trying to extract some hope, or at any rate some measure of consolation, from his meagre statement. But Mrs. Singleton thought she knew that it was no use expecting anything of that sort from Lilla. She was quite unaware, and in all honesty would have coldly denied, that she had always rejected—and that over years—any sympathy, or even any little affectionate attention, on Lilla's part.

A few minutes before Robert Singleton had left the house to obey what he himself had cheerily described as "his marching orders," he had come into his mother's bedroom—it was early in the morning—and with a good deal more determination, and far more agitation, than he had ever shown since the day he had broken to Mrs. Singleton the news of his engagement to Lilla Gasparin, he had begged his mother to be kind to his wife.

"I know you don't really like her," he had said sorely, "I've always known it, mother! Still, you must admit that she's been, in an outward sense at any rate, a good daughter-in-law. You don't see her when she isn't here, so of course you don't know how different she is when we're away, by ourselves. She's always quiet, of course, but she's so——" he had hesitated for a word—"so much brighter when we're alone together."

Not content with having it at that, he had gone lumbering on, intent, manlike, on carrying his point, and not seeing the look of revolt and anger gathering in his mother's face.

"There are not many girls who would have consented to do what Lilla did, and has done all these years—living, I mean, in another person's house, and subject to another person's will. Do, mother—do try to make her feel——" and then he had stopped, not knowing exactly how to word what he wanted to say.

And his mother had forced herself to answer kindly if coldly, out of her great and jealous love for him, "Yes, Robert, I will do my best, even more than I have already done—and, believe me, I have done what I could—to make Lilla happy and comfortable." And as she saw the look of relief flash into his face, she had gone on, deliberately, "Of course it is a shock to me to hear that she is what you call 'brighter' when

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you and she are away alone together. Yet I suppose that it is natural for that to be so, and I agree that the state of my health has created what many people would doubtless consider a disagreeable situation for Lilla."

Quite at first the two women had seemed to be drawn together by Robert's absence, though Mrs. Singleton was irritated by Lilla's passionate—James Temple had once called it "hectic and hysterical"—interest in the early progress of the war. She had burst into tears when reading the news of the destruction of the *Amphion;* and on that memorable Sunday when there had come through the first account of the Battle of Mons, she had gone about the house looking, as Mrs. Singleton's maid had expressed it, like a ghost, though none of them had any reason to suppose that "Mr. Robert," as he was still called by them all downstairs, had been in the fighting.

A few days later had come the War Office telegram, and since then, during these last four weeks, Lilla, so Mrs. Singleton now reminded herself, had kept very much apart from them all.

There had been a great deal of coming and going on the part of the married daughters, of the sons-in-law, and of the large circle of friends and acquaintances whom Mrs. Singleton had made in her long, and hitherto placid and prosperous life. But Lilla, when not in her own small sitting-room high up in the house, had spent all her time out of doors, mostly in the Enclosure, working or reading there. She kept what thoughts she had to herself, growing, maybe, a little paler, a look sometimes of anguish, as well as of anxiety, in her eyes. But leading, as she had always done since she married Robert Singleton nine years ago, a life which seemed to have very little in common with the people about her, and that though, unlike most people's daughters-in-law, she had never rebelled against living with her husband's mother.

Mrs. Singleton, during those long, dragging days of suspense, was far more vividly aware of the presence of her daughters and of her sons-in-law, who came and went daily, than of Lilla. For one thing the girls—as she still called them in her own mind—constantly discussed the question of Robert's fate, for he had always been the best of brothers to them, ever kindly, thoughtful, and affectionate.

She did not care much for either of her sons-in-law, grimly aware that both were somewhat afraid of her, and anxious, in varying degrees, to keep on good terms with her. Mrs. Singleton was far too clear-headed a woman to suppose for a moment that either James Temple or Philip Lark-Wright were concerned, in any real sense, for their wives' brother—nay, she knew, and the knowledge brought with it a bitter stab, that Robert's death would directly benefit them. Of course it was open to her to keep her fortune intact till her death—not to increase, that is, the allowances she made of a thousand a year to Jenny, and five hundred a year to Louisa. But she knew that she would probably do so after a time, and also that, if the worst proved true, she must at once re-make her will.

Lilla had not done the one and only thing her husband's mother had expected, nay, required of her, and though Robert had lived down the keen disappointment of being childless, she, Mrs. Singleton, never forgot that he had been so disappointed. She had even allowed herself to hope, deep, deep in her heart, that some day, at some vague, indeterminate future time, Lilla, who always looked fragile, and was certainly delicate, would disappear, and make way for a more suitable helpmate. This secret desire was the more natural because Mrs. Singleton herself had been a second wife, and her predecessor, like poor little Lilla, had had no children.

Then, cutting athwart what was still—though she was far from thinking so—an agreeable, because an entirely selfish, and self-absorbed existence—had come a fearful blow from fate. The outbreak of this astounding, utterly unimagined war, and the consequent withdrawal of the only thing—the constant, cheerful, kindly presence of her son—which had made life really worth living for Mrs. Singleton for many a long year.

She had found it hard enough during the Boer War, but she had then borne Robert's absence with apparent stoicism. Still, she now believed, and she had been encouraged so to believe by her doctor, that the heart affection from which she had suffered for so long, had been the ultimate outcome of the anxiety she had then endured.

But what was that anxiety, gone through when the husband, who was so much older than herself, and who had required a great deal of attention, was still alive, and when her two daughters were still in her constant care, compared with what she had suffered in the last five weeks? She had built, sub-consciously, a whole edifice of hope on the coming of the soldier this afternoon, but his account, plain and meagre as it was, had only intensified her anguished suspense, and made more vivid her mental picture of Robert's danger and distress.

There came a discreet knock on the drawing-room door, and Mrs. Singleton moved quickly from the window. But it was only her maid. The woman had a salver in her hand, and on the salver was a medicine glass, full of some coloured liquid.

Mrs. Singleton drank the contents of the glass, and then she walked slowly upstairs, to her bedroom. It was her custom to lie down for an hour before every meal, and it was now four o'clock. At five Lilla would come in to tea.

III

LILLA loved the Enclosure. Ever since her marriage it had been to her the one place of refuge where she could escape, practically whenever she felt minded to do so. At certain difficult moments of her life she had fled there in rain, fog, and snow, to walk herself back into reasonableness and submission.

As a family the Singletons were much attached to the Zoo, and to the Botanical Gardens. Robert's father had even left substantial legacies to both. But for the Enclosure, perhaps because it cost them nothing, they had naught but a kindly contempt, tempered with disagreeable memories of a dull childhood.

Still, even so, Robert and Lilla would sometimes go out there together, after the early dinner which alone suited Mrs. Singleton, and pace up and down, sometimes for as long as an hour, Lilla happy in the knowledge that, for a little while at least, she had her husband to herself. Not that she had ever very much to say to Robert, but he liked to be listened to, and to her it was restful to know that she was listening in a place where the sight of their affection could not arouse the painful jealousy of Robert's mother.

Lately, the Enclosure had become more than ever a place of refuge for Lilla. No one could blame her for spending there the long mornings and afternoons of suspense and waiting, for if there came another telegram, the telegram at once so longed for and so dreaded, Bartlett would only have to step across the road to find "Mrs. Robert," and give it to her.

And now, to-day, it was with an extraordinary sense of relief that she passed through into the still green oasis, for the half-hour in the drawing-room had been terrible to her. Indeed, Lilla, who was never hysterical, and who always tried to check and to restrain any expression of feeling when in the presence of her husband's family, had felt, once or twice, as if she must cry out in an extremity of horror while Corporal Pilcher was describing what had happened on that disastrous 26th day of August.

All through the soldier's story, meagre as it really was, Lilla had been able to visualise every little incident, the more so that while the Singletons, as a family, were only intimately interested in the progress of the war because of Robert, and Robert's part in it, she, Robert's wife, was interested in the war as War. She read every word of the meagre news which was allowed to come through, and she took in—paying for them, of course, with her own money—all the daily papers, though she braved the cold disapproval of Robert's mother in the doing of it.

The Declaration of War, nay, all that happened during the three or four days when the nation had waited in cruel suspense to know what the governers of England would do, had awakened Lilla Singleton out of the strange apathy in which she had fallen of late years. It had revived, to a surprising degree, her girlish enthusiasms, and the fact that Robert had at once taken steps to rejoin his old regiment had brought her closer to her husband than she had ever been before.

For one thing, they two, for a few days, had formed a kind of little party apart from Mrs. Singleton, from the Temples, and even from the Lark-Wrights. Robert had never doubted for a moment that England must be "in it." But James Temple had been violently opposed to his country's participation in a war which he persisted in saying only concerned Austria and Serbia, and in as far as lay in his power as a wealthy City man of good standing, he had helped to delay decision.

Philip Lark-Wright, absorbed in a big portrait group commissioned by a Colonial Government, gave the matter hardly any thought at all. His wife, Louisa, was inclined to side with the Temples. She was, if a narrow, a clever woman, and she had at once realised how even a short war must affect, in an adverse sense, the world of contemporary art.

As to old Mrs. Singleton, owing to the fact that she took her political opinions ready-made from the *Standard,* which was the only paper she read, she hoped that England would do her duty and stand by what she understood was an unwritten, but none the less binding, agreement with France. But she had not really cared what was going to happen, till she woke up to the fact that war would bring with it the going back of Robert to his regiment.

Since the day that the news of her son's uncertain fate had reached her, Mrs. Singleton had not opened her daily paper, and of the Battle of the Marne she had only learnt by hearsay.

Lilla did not at once take out her knitting, as was her usual custom. After having sat down on the iron armchair she had dragged on to the path from under a tree, she let the work-bag slip down on to the gravel, and, clasping her hands together, she stared out over the gleaming water before her, and tried once more to vision clearly all that had just been described by Corporal Pilcher.

How long had Robert lain there before he had heard the steps in the darkness which made him call out the words, "I am a wounded British officer"? Somehow that was not the sort of thing that she would have expected her husband to say; but, as the soldier had pointed out, Captain Singleton had evidently thought the approaching footsteps on that field of death were those of a German, of an enemy.

A deep convulsive sigh escaped Lilla's lips. She knew that lying there, wounded, thirsty, lonely as in our hitherto comfortable times it has never been given to civilised man to be lonely when near to death, Robert's thoughts must have turned to her—to her, his wife, and also to the narrow-minded, jealous-hearted, yet, where he was concerned, passionately loving old woman, his mother.

While listening to Corporal Pilcher, Lilla had seemed to see Robert being helped along by the lean, wiry soldier. Shutting her eyes, she could almost hear her husband's voice telling the man that he must go back to the English lines lest he be taken prisoner. It was like Robert to have shown that kind of thoughtfulness and upright sense of soldiery duty. Lilla's heart thrilled with understanding and sympathy.

She was now remorsefully aware that since they had parted in so unexpected, and, from her point of view, so dramatic a fashion, she had become far fonder of Robert. Not, poor little soul, that she had ever been exactly—unfond. But the more time went on, the more surprising had she secretly considered the marriage state, and the less had she understood God's purpose when "male and female created He them."

Lilla Singleton, without being in any sense what is called a clever woman, was yet a far more intelligent, sensitive human being, than any of the people with whom in the last ten years she had been made, perforce, to live her life. And her youth had been a bad apprenticeship for the life she had had to lead since her marriage to Robert Singleton.

She had passed a quiet childhood and girlhood on the Continent, in one of those French towns where there has always been an English colony, with a widowed mother who lived only in her own happier past, and in the present life of the soldier son who was twelve years older than his sister. But Lilla always spent the summer holidays with a happy group of high-spirited, merry-hearted cousins in a big Sussex country house; and with these same relations, after her mother's death, she had passed what had been by far the happiest year of her life.

And then, when she was nineteen, her brother, Captain Gasparin, had come back, on long leave, from India. Lilla had joined him, and it was through him that she had met Robert Singleton. Singleton's immediate, earnest wish to make her his wife, and his determined, if rather matter-of-fact love-making, had touched and flattered her.

Her heart, if unawakened, was yet a tender and a wistful heart, and it moved her deeply to feel, for the first time in her life, that she was everything to another human being. Yet even so she had hesitated—hesitated for some months, till her brother, in his turn, had fallen in love. Then Lilla had seen only too clearly—it was part of her unfortunate equipment for life that Lilla always did see very clearly what the people about her thought and felt—that her marriage to Robert Singleton would solve certain difficult immediate problems.

And so, with what had sometimes since seemed a curious lack of real reason, she had become engaged—and at once had come an awkward, pleading request from her lover that she would consent, after their marriage, to their living with his mother.

From that fate Captain Gasparin had made a very determined effort to save his sister, and it had been Lilla's own fault that he had not succeeded. But Robert Singleton, with his face half turned away, had said, "My mother has heart disease. She will not live long. My marriage is a blow to her; I think you will understand what I mean, darling, when I say that she has always been rather absurdly fond of me, and, since my father died, entirely dependent on me. Rather than lose me"—he had laughed a little wryly—

"she is willing to give us up almost the whole of her house."

Early in her marriage, during those first two secretly rebellious years when Lilla had been very unhappy, before she had, as it were, broken herself in to her new life—she had often thought bitterly of those untrue words. Of course Robert had believed what he said, but, as a matter of plain fact, his mother had in no sense given up her house to them—indeed, when it had come to the point, she had treated Robert and her daughter-in-law elect as interlopers, only setting apart for them that part of Number 19 which was still known as "the nursery floor."

And here again her brother had tried to interfere, but Lilla, "a thorough little leddy," as her old Scotch nurse always said, had declared with spirit that of course she had no wish that Mrs. Singleton should be turned out of the rooms which she had always occupied. Already Lilla had chosen the smallest of the four rooms on the nursery floor as a cosy little sitting-room for herself.

The engagement had lasted a bare two months, but there was one moment when she might have escaped—escaped to a life which, whatever it had come to be, must have been utterly unlike what her married life became. That fateful moment had flashed into being when Captain Gasparin discovered that the Singleton family did not propose to make proper settlements on his sister.

The Singletons were wealthy people, and Robert Singleton, nominally at any rate, was the head of the great City firm. But Robert's father had left the whole of his interest in the business, as well as his considerable fortune, to his widow, and as to this delicate matter of marriage settlements, Mrs. Singleton had been quite clear and very decided. Lilla had three thousand pounds, and she, Mrs. Singleton, expressed herself as ready to bring a similar sum into settlement, but not a penny more. She was willing also to make the young people, her son and his wife, a yearly allowance of a thousand pounds, which, considering that she proposed to go on paying everything connected with the house in which they were to live, was, her lawyer pointed out, very generous.

To Lilla, the whole discussion had appeared degrading, and the notion that she could bring pressure to bear by a threat to break off her engagement, unthinkable.

Then had come one of those double weddings which at the time were the fashion. Brother and sister had been married on the same day. The one couple started for Paris on their way to India; the other went off to Appledean, the old country house with which Lilla had so many early happy associations, and which now belonged to George Gasparin, one of the cousins whom her brother-in-law, James Temple, sometimes scoffingly alluded to as "Lilla's grand relations."

Lilla and Robert had been there ten days when a telegram summoned them hurriedly back to London, on the plea that Mrs. Singleton had had a very bad heart attack. And the honeymoon, which had been not inauspiciously begun—for Robert Singleton was a very good fellow and loved, with the fullest measure of love which was in him to yield, the young wife who was so unlike either himself or any of his own people—was never resumed.

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Every summer Mrs. Singleton took a house—the same house—in the near neighbourhood of Tunbridge Wells, where she had a good many acquaintances, and Robert and Lilla always accompanied her there. Sometimes, by way of a change, "Mr. and Mrs. Robert" would spend a week-end where the Temples were spending their holiday. Once—it was a white stone in Lilla's life—Mrs. Robert had been allowed to go alone, for a whole fortnight, to Paris, with the Lark-Wrights.

As for the "grand relations," of whom at one time even Robert himself had been a little jealous, they showed themselves kind, in an easy, careless way, for they were all fond of Lilla. Their head, George Gasparin, of Appledean, had married, and as his wife had rather "taken" to Lilla, the Robert Singletons were at one time often asked to the only home Lilla had ever known. But those excursions into a life so utterly unlike what was now her own, only made her restless and unhappy when she returned to town again. Also old Mrs. Singleton keenly resented her son's absences, and so, after a time, with Robert's easy acquiescence, Lilla frequently refused her cousins' invitations. This last year none had been sent.

But Lilla Singleton kept in touch with Appledean. George's wife, a clever, original, impulsive woman, who had led a strange, chequered life before her happy marriage, became, as the years went on, really attached to George's favourite cousin, and when she was in London managed to see a good deal of her. Unfortunately Mabel Gasparin did not like Robert Singleton, and if he did not suspect the fact, Lilla did. Even so, the mistress of Appledean was her only woman friend, and that though they seemed to have so little in common the one with the other.

Every one in the Singleton circle, with the possible exception of her brother-in-law, the painter Philip Lark-Wright, regarded Lilla as a very fortunate woman. She had none of the housekeeping worries which took up, in some cases, an inordinate amount of the thought and time of the younger women about her. Also, as some of these same young women enviously realised, Mrs. Robert Singleton obviously had a great deal of money to spend on dress, though, to their minds, she dressed "too quietly." As a matter of fact, Lilla did give a good deal of thought to her clothes—thought of which she was sometimes ashamed. But she was almost ridiculously fond of pretty things, if one may so describe a sensitive appreciation of beauty in every form, and Robert liked to see her what he called "well turned out." It was one of the few ways in which she was conscious that she could give pleasure to her kind and indulgent husband. As to the daily round—there was, unfortunately for Lilla, no common task—the two dined out not infrequently, though not as frequently as they would have done had it been possible for them to have their friends to dinner in their turn. But that Mrs. Singleton's state of health was supposed to make impossible.

Quite often, too, Robert took Lilla to the theatre, notwithstanding the fact that, as he grew older, many of the plays they saw together made him feel uncomfortable, for they presented to his astonished gaze such unpleasant, immoral sort of people. Fortunately, he was always able to assure himself that his delicate-minded, over-refined Lilla was not likely to take any harm from such. Occasionally, too, for Robert Singleton was a generous fellow, he would treat some six or eight of the friends who sometimes asked him and his wife to dinner, to a theatre party, and after the play they would all go on somewhere for supper—to the Savoy or to the Carlton, and have a really merry time.

In a word, Lilla, apart from the fact that she had no home of her own, led much the same life as did her sister-in-law, Mrs. James Temple. There was, however, another outstanding difference between them. Jenny Temple was the proud young mother of four fine children, and Lilla, unhappily for herself, was childless, and knew, on the authority of no fewer than three specialists to whom in turn she had shrinkingly been taken by Mrs. Lark-Wright, that she was likely to remain so.

Lilla stayed on in the Enclosure till it was nearly five o'clock. Then she got up, for she knew that Mrs. Singleton would expect her to be in to tea. Before returning home, however, she went round to a little street behind the Crescent where there was a newsagent's shop. There she bought an evening paper, and putting it in her work-bag, she went back to FitzClarence Crescent, and rang the bell of Number 19.

Soon after she had first come to live there as Robert's wife, she had asked if she might have a latch-key, but Mrs. Singleton had said firmly that from every point of view it was best Lilla should always ring the front-door bell. For one thing, it would help to keep Bartlett, the parlour-maid, up to her work.

Lilla now had Robert's latch-key in her possession—it was one of the last things he had handed over to her, making, as he did so, a little joke about her having at last attained her wish. But a queer, scrupulous feeling of delicacy made her unwilling to use it. So she rang, and waited patiently till it suited Bartlett, who was a spoiled servant, to come and open the door.

She went up straight to the drawing-room. There everything was, of course, as usual, yet perhaps because of the painful half-hour she had spent in it earlier in the afternoon, Lilla felt a kind of horror of the tasteless, expensively-furnished apartment sweep over her soul. And, perhaps also because her nerves were not in a very good state, this afternoon she told herself, with a despairing sensation of revolt, that everything there always would be as usual, for years and years to come.

The large, heavy silver tray was set out, the water in the urn was singing, the tortoise-shell caddy open, everything quite ready for Mrs. Singleton, who always made the tea herself.

And then, before Lilla had had time to sit down, her husband's mother walked into the room.

"If it will not inconvenience you," she observed formally, "we might wait a few minutes, for Jenny said that she might very possibly come back this afternoon. She went and joined the older children at the Botanical Gardens for an hour. But I thought it was no use having tea laid for the children in the dining-room, until I was quite sure that they were coming."

Lilla assented, rather eagerly for her. She was fond of the little Temples, though she never felt on really familiar terms with them. Their mother had a curious jealousy of their affection—a jealousy which in time would doubtless develop much on the same lines as had her mother's strange, morbid jealousy concerning the easy-going, kindly Robert.

But Mrs. Temple did not return to Number 19, and so, after waiting about twenty minutes, the two ladies had their tea together.

"Are you going out again?" There was an undercurrent of reprobation in Mrs. Singleton's voice—and it stung Lilla. She had not meant to go out again; on the other hand, there was no reason why she should not do so.

"Yes," she said quietly. "I think I shall go round the park. Robert asked me to take a walk every afternoon." And then, as she felt a strangled sob rising in her throat, she left the room abruptly, and went downstairs, almost running through the hall in her wish to escape.

As she began walking quickly past the park railings, her heart was full of what seemed a new pain, and a new revolt, against the dull uselessness of her life.

When she had first heard he was going abroad, Lilla had eagerly asked her husband if he would allow her to try and obtain an army nursing job. She had gone through the Red Cross Nursing Course because her sister-in-law, Mrs. Lark-Wright, had been asked by a smart lady, whose portrait Philip was then painting, to get up a class of candidates on Campden Hill.

But Robert's answer had been very decided. "I'm afraid, my dear, that it wouldn't do! You see, I'm sure that my mother would disapprove of anything of the kind. She is so very old-fashioned." And then he had added, in a softer voice, "It's a great comfort to me, darling, to feel that you will be with poor mother after I've gone. I'm afraid she minds a great deal."

Lilla had choked down the obvious answer, namely, that Robert's mother never wanted to see her at all, and that Mrs. Singleton's natural comforter—if she would admit of one, which was improbable—would be her own daughter, Jenny Temple, who lived within a few minutes' walk of FitzClarence Crescent. Lilla had also wondered, when listening to Robert's words, if it was something evil in herself which made her so often feel as if every Singleton—even her own husband, who was, thank God, so little like the others—lived in a kind of world of make-believe.

Was it possible that Robert, after all these years, should *really* think that she could be any help or comfort to his mother? Yet she knew that, even if a make-believer, he was not a hypocrite. He probably had brought himself to think that with him away, and in danger, these two women, each of whom he loved so truly, would be drawn nearer together.

Lilla walked herself into a state of weary quiescence, and then, using Robert's latch-key for the first time, she let herself into the house.

IV

Two hours later Lilla had already gone up stairs for the night. She and Mrs. Singleton had had their very early dinner together; and, after dinner, Mrs. Single-

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ton had said that she did not feel well, and so was going straight to bed.

And now Lilla was sitting in her own little sitting-room, her face covered with her hands, and tears trickling through her fingers.

She was saying to herself, over and over again, "I can't bear it! I can't bear it!" And yet she hardly knew what it was she could not bear—whether the dreadful uncertainty as to her husband's fate—whether her mother-in-law's silent unkindness—or simply the general lack of sympathy about her.

Even Cecil Sturges had failed her. Somehow she had thought Robert's one man friend would care enough to make an effort to see her alone to-day. She had believed that he would understand how utterly miserable and forlorn she felt.

During Sturges' absence his letters, though they had only contained accounts of how he was spending his holiday, with, of course, sympathetic references to the general anxiety concerning Robert, had been a real comfort to her; she missed them, now that he was at home again.

Lilla was not a woman much given to self-pity, but to-night she gave herself up wholly to that unprofitable luxury.

Suddenly the door opened, and Mrs. Singleton, tall, pale, rigid, walked into the room.

It was years since Robert's mother had come up to this, the third, floor of her big house, and as Lilla stood up, she was so surprised that a tremor ran through her heart. At the same time she instinctively welcomed the thrill of foreboding surprise and excitement.

She stood up.

"Lilla? A telegram has come for you. May I open it?" There was a touch of reluctant, agonised entreaty in the breathless, choking voice.

Lilla said, "Oh, yes—please do," in a low, startled tone, and then staring with a sort of fearsome fascination at her mother-in-law, she waited.

Mrs. Singleton opened the telegram, and in steady, toneless accents, she read, out loud, the words:

"Deeply regret to inform you that Captain Robert Singleton, 3rd Battalion Bugle Brigade, reported wounded and missing, is now reported killed. Lord Kitchener expresses his sympathy.

"SECRETARY,
"War Office."

She put the telegram down on the edge of her daughter-in-law's writing-table, and then, turning and moving more quickly than Lilla would have thought possible, she walked out of the room, shutting the door carefully behind her.

For a moment every feeling, every sensation in the younger woman was merged in deep, aching sympathy for Robert's mother. Yet she dared not follow Mrs. Singleton to say even a word of what was in her heart, and she listened with painful anxiety to the heavy, faltering footsteps going slowly down the stairs.

At last she heard the door of the large front bedroom on the lower landing open, and then there came the sound of a key turning in the lock.

Then, and not till then, did Lilla take up the telegram which had been addressed to herself.

But once she had it in her hand, she read it over and over again; and at last she noted, with a certain apathetic surprise, that it had been sent off that morning, and should surely have been delivered before one o'clock.

Now that the blow had fallen—the blow which she had thought would never fall—she felt unnaturally calm.

Somehow Lilla could not think of Robert as dead. For years and years her husband had been the one big, living, insistent fact in her life. Counting all the more because, owing to the purposeless life he was made to lead, he was, if Lilla's master, yet so completely dependent on her companionship and eager, constant sympathy. After having been for thirty-one years of his life his mother's darling and his mother's slave, Robert Singleton had plucked up sufficient courage to seek out and acquire a darling and a slave for himself. With the exception of that one fortnight spent by Lilla with the Lark-Wrights in Paris, the two had never been parted, even for a day and a night, since their marriage, ten years back. Robert had always said, and Lilla had every reason to believe it true, that he loved her far too well ever to want to take a holiday by himself.

And this evening, so strange a thing is the human heart, the tears first started to Lilla's eyes when suddenly she remembered that one time when they had been apart. It had been just after her three separate expeditions to the three noted specialists, that the Singletons' own trusted family doctor suddenly ordained that "Mrs. Robert" must have a thorough mental change. Her husband, with rare unselfishness, had said that he would stay with his mother, while she went and had a good time in what he had called "gay Paree." Lilla was sorry, bitterly sorry now, that she had gone.

Soon she began to ask herself, with a certain piteous self-questioning, what it was that Robert would think it right for her to do now, at once. She thought he would probably wish her to send for his sister, Jenny Temple. Louisa Lark-Wright lived a long way off, but the Temples were close by. Also, Jenny was her mother's favourite daughter.

She sat down at her writing-table and took a sheet of note-paper out of the little brass rack. With a pen in her hand she stared down at the blank sheet of paper for some minutes.

"My dear Jenny"—so far did she get, then she tore up the sheet and put down the words, "Dearest Jenny." But she tore that up too, and ended by simply writing across the note-paper:

"The enclosed has just come. I fear Mrs. Singleton is not well. She has locked herself into her bedroom. Could you come round at once? I think perhaps we ought to send for the doctor, but I'm afraid to do it by myself.

"Lilla."

She folded the telegram into the sheet of paper, placed it in an envelope, then went downstairs, very quietly, into the drawing-room. There she rang the bell—she had been taught, early in her life in that house, never to go down and call out to a servant by name.

Some minutes went by, but no one came. She rang again—and at last Bartlett opened the door.

"Will you please have this sent round at once to Mrs. Temple?"

"Yes, ma'am." And then, to Lilla's amazement, staid Bartlett burst into bitter sobs. "Oh, Mrs. Robert, ma'am! Will you intercede for me with Mrs. Singleton? There was a telegram—it came this morning, for you, ma'am, and it was forgotten. I don't know how it was—but it was forgotten! I sent Lucy" (that was the second housemaid) "up with it to-night, and Mrs. Singleton heard Lucy—Lucy's heavy-footed—and called out asking if that was Robey. Lucy went in and told the missus that the telegram had come this morning. She was awfully angry—so Lucy said. She said to Lucy"—the woman's agitation was extreme—"that she means to give me notice to-morrow."

Lilla put her hand on Bartlett's heaving shoulder. "Of course I'll speak to Mrs. Singleton," she said gently. "But I'm sure she would never think of dismissing you. Why, you've been with her over twenty years——"

"Twenty-three years, ma'am."

"Mrs. Singleton's had a very unhappy day, Bartlett——"

"I know, ma'am—that's why I'm so sorry. I can't think how I could have forgotten. I just put it on the shelf in the pantry."

Lilla nerved herself to say something more. "And, Bartlett? The telegram contained bad news. That is

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why I want you to send round this note at once to Mrs. Temple."

There came a look of startled pain and surprise on the stolid face. "It—it isn't Mr. Robert, ma'am?"

Lilla nodded. Somehow the old servant's agitation stilled her own, made her feel calmer.

Bartlett glanced dubiously across at the still uncurtained windows, then, after a moment's hesitation, she left the room. As she did so, Mrs. Singleton's bedroom bell rang sharply, twice, and Lilla, full of unsubstantial and yet poignant fears, rushed upstairs.

Softly she tried the handle of the bedroom door. To her surprise it was now unlocked. She opened the door, and walked, hesitatingly, a few steps forward into the room. The blinds had been pulled down, and Lilla could only see her mother-in-law's tall, spare form outlined against the white patch of the window near which she was standing.

"Is that Robey?" Mrs. Singleton's voice was quite composed and steady.

"No," said Lilla. She felt as if she, herself, no longer had full control over her own voice. "It's I——" She nearly added the word "mother."

"I rang for Robey. Would you please find out where she is, and convey to her a message that I want her, at once?"

Lilla stood for a moment irresolute. "I have sent a note round to Jenny," she whispered. "I enclosed the telegram. I think she'll be here very soon."

"I am sorry you did not wait till the morning. Still, if she comes, of course I will see her." There was a painful pause—then Mrs. Singleton spoke, "Might I again ask you to send me my maid?"

Up to that moment Lilla, in spite of all the varying phases she had gone through in the last half-hour, had been more or less numbed, stunned with an awful sense of loss, and of calamity. But those few words of Mrs. Singleton's seemed to sting her into life. What a strange, horrible way of showing your love for a person by being unkind to another person whom the one you loved—loved!

With a heart suddenly awakened to indignant, wrathful pain, she shut the door. Robey, her mother-in-law's stout, elderly maid, was panting up the staircase. "Mrs. Singleton wants you," she said coldly, then went once more up to her own sitting-room.

When there Lilla looked round with a strange feeling that now nothing here belonged to her—with the exception of the writing-table, which had been a wedding present. She went and sat down at the writing-table. She knew that there were two or three people to whom she ought to write at once, now, to-night.

The person who first came into her mind was Cecil Sturges, the second Mabel Gasparin. To Sturges, she wrote a very simple, short letter. In a postscript she added the words, "I should be grateful if you would come in and see me for a few minutes to-morrow morning, on the way to your office."

In those pregnant moments just spent within her mother-in-law's bedroom, Lilla had formed a sudden resolution. This was that she would not stay at Number 19 a day, nay, not an hour, longer than was absolutely necessary.

Her mind was too weary, too excited, to formulate any plans. But she knew that she was now free to get away—away—away. Away from all these queer, unkind, underbred people. She repeated the ugly word "underbred" to herself. Yes, that was what they all were, Robert's mother, his other relations, and their heartless, self-absorbed acquaintances and friends.

As she sat in the now quick-gathering darkness, clasping and unclasping her hands, she was frightened at the violence of her feeling against Mrs. Singleton, and against even Robert's unoffending sisters and their husbands. She hated them all.—But for them, she told herself piteously, she might have been happy with Robert—really happy!

But she did not want to think of her kind and affectionate husband here, in this house where she had always felt a stranger and a sojourner in the midst of people who often seemed to misunderstand her purposely, and where, alas! she had so often felt bitterly contemptuous of the easy, rather cowardly obedience Robert had ever been ready to show his imperious, narrow-minded mother. . . .

At last she bent down over the writing-table and began the letter to her cousin, Mrs. Gasparin. Lilla knew Mabel Gasparin would be sorry for her. But how much sorry? Mabel had once said that she, Lilla, did not know what love was. At the time Lilla had laughed—laughed and been perhaps a little shocked by Mabel's sudden, passionate eulogy of love—the jealous, restless, hungry love which burns, and so often sears, the heart. Robert had once betrayed a touch of that strange, disturbing passion, for he had been jealous—acutely, unreasonably, ridiculously jealous—of Cecil Sturges. But he had conquered his jealousy—conquered it so completely that of late he

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had actually sometimes allowed his wife to go to a concert or to a picture gallery with Cecil, good, steady, loyal friend Cecil, who would have been amazed indeed had he guessed Robert's absurd suspicion—a suspicion put into Robert's head by his vulgar, silly sister, Jenny Temple.

Remembering that odd episode, which Lilla had kept entirely secret, it was a comfort now to know that she had shown her gratitude for Robert's love by many a submission of which she alone had known the cost.

Lilla was still writing, her flushed face bent over the table, when there came a knock at the door.

It was another telegram. And, at the sight of the buff-coloured envelope she felt herself shaken with a fearful excitement which had no reason in it.

She stared so long and so fixedly at the servant that the woman grew frightened: "Would you like me to take the telegram down to Mrs. Singleton, ma'am?"

And Lilla, in a dazed voice, said "No, no—give it to me, Bartlett."

She tore open the envelope, read over the words that were written there, and then, with the form open in her hand, she went downstairs, and knocked again at her mother-in-law's door.

The voice which answered was Louisa Lark-Wright's clear, hard voice, and for a moment Lilla felt very much surprised—then she reminded herself that the two sisters were on the telephone. Jenny Temple had of course telephoned to Louisa the moment she had got the bad news, and Louisa had at once come to Number 19 as fast as a taxi could bring her.

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As she opened the door, she saw that her sisters-in-law were sitting, one on each side, by their mother's bed.

"I think Mrs. Singleton will like to read this telegram. Perhaps she would like to keep it." There was a curiously new note in Lilla's gentle, low voice; it was a note of complete indifference to the opinion of the person to whom she was speaking.

She laid the telegram down on Mrs. Singleton's bed; and then, turning round, she shut the door behind her quietly.

Mrs. Lark-Wright took up the telegram: "May I see what it is, mother?"

Mrs. Singleton nodded. She was lying back, with her eyes shut, but as her daughter began reading, she opened them.

"The King and Queen deeply regret the loss you and the Army have sustained by the death of your husband in the service of his country. Their Majesties truly sympathise with you in your sorrow.

"PRIVATE SECRETARY."

"How very gratifying!" exclaimed Jenny Temple.

Mrs. Singleton sat up and straightened herself in bed; she held out her hand, and the telegram was handed to her. Slowly she read the message over to herself. Yes, it was very gratifying.

"Did Lilla say that I could keep this?" she asked. And both her daughters answered eagerly, "Yes, mother."

No one spoke for a few moments, and then Mrs. Temple said meaningly, "Did you notice how odd Lilla was in her manner? I was so taken aback that I didn't say anything. But I think the least she might have done would have been to give us each a kiss. After all, poor Robert was our brother as well as her husband. Of course I could see that she had been crying."

A rush of colour flamed up into Mrs. Singleton's pallid face. "Lilla has no feeling," she said in a tense tone, "no feeling at all! She did not even think of sparing me the pain and trouble of ordering all the blinds to be at once drawn down."

"And yet," said Louisa Lark-Wright slowly, "I do think, mother, that Lilla was very fond of Robert, in her own queer, niminy-piminy way. She was always"—and then she stopped, hesitating for the word which to her mind would express her meaning. At last she found it. "She was always so obedient to him, and Robert most certainly was very, very much attached to her."

Mrs. Singleton winced. "Most men are attached to their wives," she said stiffly.

A question was trembling on Mrs. Temple's lips, and though she stood in considerable awe of her mother, she at last ventured to put it. "And what do you think will happen to Lilla now?" she asked inquisitively.

Mrs. Singleton waited for some time before answering, then she fixed her sunken eyes—the desolate eyes which were now so full of bitter pain—on her younger daughter's good-looking, rather vacuous face. "I feel sure," she said deliberately, "that after a little while Lilla will marry Cecil Sturges. Robert occasionally allowed her to go out with him in a way which would have been considered most indecorous and peculiar when *I* was a young woman."

"I used to think at one time that poor Robert was rather jealous of Cecil Sturges," said Jenny Temple, and her pouting lips almost relaxed into a smile.

PART ONE

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

LILLA SINGLETON lay on a deck-chair under a great cedar tree which spread its dark, noble branches beside the arboretum of Appledean House. She was waiting for her cousin, Mabel Gasparin, to drive back from Sanchester, the Cathedral town seven miles from Appledean, where Mrs. Gasparin now spent the whole of every day at the Red Cross hospital.

Lilla had been a widow for close on thirteen months, but this was only her second visit to Appledean since the war.

As soon as they had read the bewildered, pitiful little letter written the same night as that on which Lilla had received the news that Robert had indeed been killed, Mabel and George Gasparin, without losing a minute, had hurried off to their village post office, and had sent an urgent telegram bidding their cousin to come down to them at once. She had gratefully accepted, for the invitation solved for her a difficult and painful problem.

That was a year ago next month. And oh, how everything had changed since then, not only in Lilla's own life, but in the life of England, and of all that England stands for to the sentient Englishwoman.

A year ago next month, Appledean House had been full of people, most of them more or less strangers to the host and hostess, for a vast camp, nay, a series of vast camps, had sprung up all over the high downs by which the beautiful old Sussex estate was surrounded. And the Gasparins, as a matter of course, had kept their huge, roomy house hospitably open for as many officers and officers' wives as they could find place for.

At that time the battle of the Marne had just been fought, and the German hosts were still being thrust back. Every one, in England at least, believed the war would soon be over—so soon, indeed, that George Gasparin had been in what was for him a state of restless anxiety lest he should not get out in time to be "in it." And all the men about him had shared in that dread.

Although she had now been at Appledean for a whole fortnight, this was the first time Lilla had sat in this particular spot since last October, and the fact that she had spent the afternoon here, to-day, made her remember that far-away time—so vividly, so painfully.

The last time she had sat here, on the edge of the arboretum, there had been at least a dozen people gathered together for tea under the cedar. She even remembered the tea, for it had been a bountiful, pre-war kind of tea, set out by a butler and two tall footmen whom no one, however far-seeing and patriotic, would have dreamed of as three possible soldiers *then*.

The round, solid oak, garden tables which a year ago had been spread with such a profusion of good things, were close to Lilla now, looking just the same, though they had seen twelve months of rain, snow, and sunshine in between. On the one rested a small tray on which her tea had just been brought to her, and on the other lay her work-bag, and a book she had been trying to read.

Lilla had but to shut her eyes to visualise the members of that now vanished company. She could see the straight-limbed, keen-eyed, khaki-clad men, and their pretty, graceful women-folk. She remembered how cheerful and excited they had all been, sitting and standing about, enjoying the close of a beautiful autumn day, and kind, if brusque, Mabel Gasparin's delicious tea.

Lilla sighed—a deep, involuntary sigh. Many of the men who had been there—it seemed a terrible, an abnormal proportion—had gone never to return. And their wives, less fortunate than she, Lilla, were now scattered all over England, eking out in many cases pitifully small incomes, their days of love, of laughter, of happy, sometimes futile, busy-ness, cut short with an awful, tragic suddenness.

One young couple among them Lilla particularly remembered. The Collets had been married just five weeks before she had first met them here; and now the bridegroom of a year ago was—no, not killed: many people would doubtless say that that would have been a far better fate than the fate which had overtaken him. Bob Collet had lost his right arm and his left leg at the second battle of Ypres. Mabel had heard from pretty little Mrs. Collet only yesterday. They were coming to Appledean later on, for a long visit.

Yes, of those men, each of whom Lilla remembered so well to-day, only her cousin, George Gasparin, seemed to have kept quite "all right" up to now. He had not even been wounded, though "through it all" from the Aisne. But when he came back, as he did now and again for a few days, he was different, somehow, from the old kindly, careless George. There was a serious, smileless look in his eyes, and he was apt to start a little at any unexpected sound. Still, George and Mabel were among the very lucky ones—he had even been able to get home for the first week of his twin-boys' holidays.

The war, which had brought such amazing changes, had changed no one more than Mabel Gasparin—indeed, it had changed her sooner and more radically than any of the women about her.

Mabel loved George with what was to Lilla—who had always regarded her cousin as simply a good-natured, rather commonplace man—a strange, passionate intensity, singular indeed in a woman who had once ventured her all on a less lawful passion. But so it was, and it had made her take even the probability of his going to the Front with what at the time had seemed exaggerated distress. Mrs. Gasparin had gone about that first autumn of the war in a dry-eyed, dry-throated agony, of which Lilla, always sensitively aware of what those about her were feeling, had been perhaps the only person really conscious, among that large, cheerful, and in many cases self-absorbed, party of men and women.

And then, when at last late in October, George had gone out, his wife had at once come up to London, and taken on a really heavy job in one of the big hospitals. It was one of those tiresome, behind-the-scenes jobs not so easy to fill as the others; but the hard work had been the best medicine for her agonising suspense, and when off duty she had seen a very great deal of Lilla. They had met daily, though they were both engaged in war work. And Lilla had become very fond of

Mabel—almost as fond of Mabel as Mabel had always been of her.

At the end of July, Mrs. Gasparin had had to come back to Appledean for her boys' holidays, and then at once had come the joy, the painful joy, of George's few days home on leave.

Meanwhile, Lilla, after doing various kinds of war work which somehow had not seemed as much worth while as she would have liked, for she had broken down under the strain of hospital ward nursing, had been offered the charge of a big canteen in one of the new munitions factories at which they were trying the then novel experiment of employing women on men's work.

That, arduous as it was, she did quite admirably, and it had brought a new, human element into her life—that of care and kindness for the girls, the rough, good-natured Cockney girls, who could work and play with equal zest, and who for the first time in their lives had more money than was good for them to spend. Among other wise things done by her, Lilla Singleton had started a Savings Bank in the factory.

Then, quite suddenly, the shrewd old doctor who looked after the health of the munition workers had ordered Mrs. Robert Singleton a fortnight's holiday, and to her surprise Lilla had discovered that she must obey. The tears had come into her eyes when she had found the lady who was to take over her work, waiting to receive her instructions.

It had, of course, been out of the question that she should go anywhere but to Appledean, yet Appledean had provided—though Lilla would not now admit it, even to herself—a rather disappointing holiday. She and Mabel had very little time together, for Mrs. Gasparin refused to take off any whole day, even Sunday, from the hospital. And when she did come home, she was so tired, that after a bath and a short dinner she used to go to bed almost at once. To-day, however, she was coming home from Sanchester a little earlier, for her visitor was going back, this evening, to London and to the work she had come to love.

The nature of that work made Lilla's life curiously solitary and unlike other people's lives, for it compelled her to turn night into day. She arrived at the munitions factory at midnight, and had to keep very wide awake till ten the next morning, when she went home to bed.

But she had come to feel really at home in the plainly furnished rooms, overlooking a desolate reach of river, which she had found in an odd countrified-looking little house on the Embankment, beyond Vauxhall Bridge; and she was very well looked after during the solitary hours she did spend at home, by the bad-tempered but efficient Bartlett. For old Mrs. Singleton had carried out her threat. The day after she had received the delayed news of her son's death she had given Bartlett notice.

Deep in her heart—she would not have said it to Mabel for the world, intimate as they were—Lilla was really glad to be going back to London. She loved London—she always had loved London, even during the dreary years she had spent at FitzClarence Crescent.

Only the very young among the very tired really enjoy those oases of country solitude during which the holiday-maker is forced to think, to survey the past and to look forward, perhaps with no great optimism, to the future—to take stock, as it were, of what remains of probable or possible happiness.

During these two weeks of perfect weather, spent in a singularly beautiful house and garden, Lilla had passed wakeful, vaguely anxious nights, and long, dreary days. The solitariness of a place she had last seen so full of life and stir, affected her nerves, and more than once her hostess, feeling she was too much alone, had anxiously urged her to go and see an old lady who lived some two miles from Appledean, and who was, if Mabel were to be trusted, a very remarkable and delightful person. Mrs. Carteret was her name, and she was a Roman Catholic—that was why she lived in the tiny hamlet of Baycombe, for close to her little house was a Benedictine monastery raised on the site of a pre-Reformation ruin.

But Lilla had a kind of fear of old women, and that although she got on better with Mrs. Singleton than ever before. Now and again, but less and less often as time went on, she paid a formal visit to the mistress of "Number 19," for she believed that so Robert would have wished her to do, and now that Robert no longer stood between them, she was sometimes surprised to find what a clear, powerful, if narrow, intellect her mother-in-law still had.

Lilla also kept in touch with Louisa Lark-Wright. Occasionally Louisa and Philip would ask her to lunch or to dinner, and whenever she could do so conveniently she accepted their invitations.

But her real link with these people was Cecil Sturges, the only man of whom she had seen, on and off, a great deal since her widowhood.

The tottering old servant who had taken the stalwart butler's place came slowly over the grass, a salver in his hand. Lilla took up the letter, and opened it languidly, for she did not know the unformed, rather childish handwriting.

Then she quickened into kindly interest. The letter was from one of the workers in the munitions factory—a young married woman who was expecting her first baby. This rather incoherently expressed letter was to say that the writer was ill, suffering from shock "along of last night's awful Zeppelin raid." And then, in a few bald words, the woman told simply how her old grandfather, standing nigh to her, had been blown to pieces. "They do say as how stray bits of him have already been found in the next parish, close to the railway line."

A dreadful thing—horrible exceedingly—yet somehow sounding hardly real in this lovely, peaceful garden.

"Lilla!"

Mabel Gasparin's eager, if now hoarse and tired, voice, made Lilla look up, startled. She had not hoped to see her cousin so soon as this.

"Yes, I knocked off quite early, and looked in on Mrs. Carteret on my way. But she didn't want me, for she's had the beloved son at home for a week. He's a big pot now in one of the Intelligence Departments." She waited a moment and then added, "I first knew him in Egypt. In fact I first saw Dare Carteret—Dare is short for Darrell, his mother's maiden name—at the same moment that I first saw George."

Lilla was surprised. Mabel hardly ever mentioned that part of her past life which had been connected with Egypt; but she went on, speaking rather quickly: "I've never liked Dare Carteret. He's not my kind of man. He's George's friend, not mine, but he's a good son—that I will say—for he spends every moment he can spare from his work with his mother, and he's had a telephone put into Baycombe Cottage so that he can talk to her every night from town. You really *must* go and see Mrs. Carteret next time you're here, Lilla. On the whole she's the most wonderful woman I've ever known."

"Yes, I will," said Lilla eagerly. Her conscience pricked her a little over this poor infirm lady of whom Mabel seemed so fond.

Mrs. Gasparin sat down on the end of Lilla's long wicker chair.

"No, don't move! It's ridiculous to say so, considering how little I've seen of you—but I *shall* miss you, darling, and I *am* sorry you're going away to-night."

Lilla bent forward, and, putting out her hand, she grasped the other's fingers without speaking. It was sad to see how thin and how old-looking Mabel had become in the last twelve months. Before the war she had been such a strikingly handsome woman—her tall, slender figure full of grace and vigour, her dark eyes full of fire.

"But you don't look as much better as I hoped you would be." Mrs. Gasparin glanced quickly into the sensitive face of her friend. "Still, you *do* look years younger than you did this time last year. I wish *I* did."

"I feel much better than when I arrived," "Yes, but you don't even seem as cheerful as you did last winter. Is anything worrying you? Is it money?" And as Lilla shook her head, she went on: "Come, out with it! I'm quite sure there *is* something. Is it—?" she waited for quite a long time—"Is it——?" she said again.

And Lilla smiled up into the questioner's face. "Is is what?" she said lightly, sure that Mabel would not guess.

But the words Mabel next uttered, though they, too, were uttered lightly, proved that she had guessed, for "Is it a man?" asked Mabel Gasparin at last.

And then it was Mabel's turn to be surprised, for, instead of the quick shake of the head she had expected, a flood of colour flamed up into Lilla's face, and, "Yes," she said slowly. "It is, I suppose, a man. Mabel, would you be very shocked if I were to tell you that—that——"

"That you are thinking of marrying again? No, not a bit shocked. But who is he? How long have you known him? Where did you meet him? Oh, Lilla, you might have told me!"

Lilla looked at her nervously. "Can't you guess?" she asked in a low voice.

But the other was quite at a loss; and her mind went over, in flashing review, every man with whom she had ever seen her cousin, including two or three of the soldiers who had been here at Appledean, last October, and who had been home wounded, since. In spite of the fact—or was it because?—she was a newly-made widow, the unattached among their guests last year had shown a close and sympathetic interest in Lilla Singleton.

"No," she said at last, "I can't guess at all! Do tell me, Lilla—don't keep me in suspense."

And then Lilla, almost in a whisper, uttered the name, "Cecil Sturges."

"Cecil Sturges? But that's an absurd idea!" Mabel Gasparin could not keep the dismay, the contempt, the almost horror she felt, out of her voice. And then, rather sternly fixing her eyes on Lilla's face, she asked, "How long have you been thinking of this? You certainly weren't thinking of it last winter!"

"I didn't know—I had no idea then——" Lilla's voice faltered.

"You didn't know—you had no idea—of what?"

"That Cecil cared for me."

"And how long have you known it?"

"He told me the day before I came here."

"Oh, I see—he waited till you'd been a widow exactly twelve months. Yes, that is just what I should have expected Cecil Sturges to do. And, and—— Oh, my dear, you haven't said yes?"

"No, I haven't said yes—yet. He left London yesterday for his holiday. He won't be back for quite a month. But, Mabel? Do you really think that it would be a shocking thing to do?" There was rather a piteous look of questioning in Lilla's face.

And then Mabel Gasparin, perhaps because she was tired and highly strung, burst out angrily: "There would be nothing shocking about it at all—if you loved the man! But, Lilla, you can't look me in the face and tell me that you love Cecil Sturges? Why, the idea's absurd! He isn't what *I* call a man——"

And then, on hearing this outburst, Lilla began to laugh helplessly, hysterically.

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"Don't laugh," said Mabel coldly. "There's nothing to laugh at in what I said. Compare Cecil Sturges to—well, to any man you like. Compare him to George——"

"But I can't marry George," gasped Lilla. She was still laughing, but the tears were very near her eyes. "Even if I *wished* to—I couldn't marry George."

"Don't be silly!" said the other sharply. "You know very well what I mean. Cecil Sturges is—well, I won't say what I think he is. But oh, Lilla—" she turned and leant forward, putting her hand heavily on the younger woman's shoulder—"do for once take the advice of a person who *really* cares for you," her voice softened, it became infinitely grave and tender. "I wouldn't say what I'm going to say unless I loved you, dear. I'm quite aware that it may—well, break our friendship."

And as Lilla, the tears now in her eyes, shook her head vehemently, "Yes, indeed it may—but do listen, do try and understand what I mean! Do give yourself—and yes, I *will* say it—do give love a chance! I speak of what I know, darling. I've not regretted *any* of the things which have happened in my life."

Lilla looked at Mabel with troubled eyes. She knew that her friend had indeed spoken to her from the depths of her innermost heart, and also that she spoke of what she knew. But she, Lilla, profoundly disagreed with Mabel.

Gravely she looked straight into Mrs. Gasparin's troubled, convulsed face. "I don't think I could love twice," she said in a very low voice. "I'm only speaking for myself, Mabel, but I do not feel I could marry what you call a 'real' man again."

The other shook her head violently. "For God's sake," she said, "let's do away with pretence! You must know, Lilla, that you didn't love Robert at all—in the sense of which I speak. And the only excuse for your thinking of doing this unnatural thing is that you don't know what love is. I'm not unjust to Cecil Sturges—I do like him, and I respect him. I ought not to have said what I said just now, for I realise that he has been a good friend to you, especially since poor Robert's death. But that is no reason, darling, why you should walk back into the prison-house of a loveless marriage. If a woman is as fond of another woman as I have long been of you, she knows without being told a good many things about her."

Lilla remained silent. She felt that there was something that was true, as well as much that was untrue and unreasonable, in what Mabel said.

"Is there any real reason why you feel drawn to do this thing?" Mabel looked with a kind of painful questioning tenderness into the other's face, and Lilla's heart responded to the tenderness.

"Sometimes," she said, hanging her head as a child might have done, "sometimes, Mabel, I feel very lonely! At first, you see, I was so glad to get away from them all—I mean from Robert's mother, and from his sisters, and also from all the peculiar people they knew. I hadn't a single friend, hardly an acquaintance, among them. But during the last three or four months I have felt very lonely sometimes."

"But you saw Cecil Sturges nearly every day?"

said the other shrewdly. "Didn't that prevent your feeling lonely, Lilla?"

And Lilla, not seeing the trend of the question, shook her head. "No," she said doubtfully, "no, it didn't—but then, you see, I didn't know that he cared for me. I thought he came to see me out of good-nature, and because before Robert's death we had always seen a good deal of each other. He was Robert's greatest friend."

"Was he fond of you then?" asked Mabel suddenly.

And Lilla flushed, a painful unbecoming flush. "Perhaps he was," she said reluctantly. "He thinks now that he was."

"Was Robert ever jealous of Cecil Sturges?" went on Mabel abruptly. She was beginning to wonder uncomfortably if she was on the wrong tack, after all.

"Yes, Robert was very jealous of him for a short time, five or six years ago. But it was his sister, Jenny Temple, who put it into his head that Cecil was getting fond of me. And, Mabel? Whatever Cecil may think now, there was really no cause for Robert's jealousy. A woman always knows—don't you think so?"

Mrs. Gasparin nodded. She knew now that she was on the right tack—after all.

There was a long silence between the two, and then Mabel Gasparin spoke again: "Have you already made up your mind, Lilla?"

"I haven't quite made up my mind—" Lilla spoke in a low, reluctant tone. She was at once glad and sorry that she had told Mabel. It was good to feel that some one loved her as dearly and as selflessly as

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did this strange, violent-natured friend of hers. But she felt disturbed at the way Mabel had spoken, not only of Cecil, but of Robert—Robert, whose loving kindness, cheery vitality, and great courage in the face of death, loomed so much larger now in Lilla's memory than did his indolence, and his easy-going, unvirile submission to all his mother's unreasonable wishes.

Suddenly she realised that Mabel was speaking to her again, and with great earnestness.

"Well, look here, Lilla—I want you to do one thing for my sake. I suppose you write to each other every day?"

Lilla nodded gravely.

And then Mrs. Gasparin asked another question, which she would perhaps have done better to have left unasked. "Does he write you love-letters? What queer, priggish love-letters they must be!" she exclaimed disdainfully.

But Lilla only smiled. "I don't suppose *you* would think them love-letters," she said good-humouredly. "But they've quite enough love in them to suit me."

"Well, what I ask you to do is to wait till Mr. Sturges comes back—till you have seen him again—before giving him a final answer."

Lilla looked into Mabel's face. She was stirred, deeply moved, by her friend's eager, insistent concern in what was, after all, so outside her own life. If only some one had cared as Mabel cared now when she, poor ignorant little Lilla Gasparin, had drifted into her engagement with Robert Singleton!

"Very well," she said quietly, "I won't make up my mind till I have seen him again. He is not in any hurry—he's quite willing to wait till after the war."

"Is he indeed?"—there was a measureless depth of contempt in Mrs. Gasparin's voice. Still, she was glad, and not a little touched, that Lilla had made even this small concession. But she was one of those women who hate to be what they call "sentimental," so, "If ever I have a girl," she began lightly—"I've been thinking of it lately, for I believe it would cheer George up after all this trouble—I mean her to be exactly like you, Lilla!"

"I'm afraid she'll disappoint you sadly," said Lilla, responding to the other's changed mood.

But Mabel shook her head. "Indeed, she won't disappoint me," she said softly. "She'll be such a restful little dear—not a bit like her poor mother! In fact, if she's like you, she'll grow up into George's ideal of what a girl should be. You can't think how proper and priggish he's become lately. You see, she'll be so easy to manage—so easy to marry, too. Every man who sees you falls in love with you—for all you're so cold!"

"Am I so cold?" For the second time during this odd talk of theirs, the tears welled up into Lilla's blue eyes.

Mabel turned and put her arms impulsively round the younger woman's shoulders, and for a moment the two clung to one another.

"No, of course you're not! What an ungrateful brute I am! I couldn't have got through last winter without you; I should have gone mad. Still, you know what I mean," she whispered in Lilla's little ear.

CHAPTER II

THE Portsmouth express sped swiftly through the sleeping Sussex and Surrey countrysides, and but for war-time conditions—the windows of the first-class railway carriage in which she sat being all closely blinded—Lilla Singleton would have enjoyed gazing out on the starlit landscape. She could have read the time away, for the train was brightly lighted, but she had over-read during her long, solitary fortnight, and so she simply leaned back, and let her thoughts, and memories of the past, possess her mind.

If she had been alone in the railway carriage she might have tried to sleep, for she knew she had a long, busy night of very hard work before her. But she was not alone. At the station next to Appledean, a tiny station called Baycombe, there had got in at the very last moment, when the train was already in motion, a long, lean, square-shouldered man who looked as if he ought to be in khaki, instead of in a rough tweed suit.

He had settled himself into the further opposite corner of the railway carriage, and very soon he had taken out of his portmanteau a largish, old-fashioned looking book—as a matter of fact, the second volume of the first edition of Trollope's "Framley Parsonage." He was reading the story for the third—or was it the fourth?—time, and that perhaps was why now and again he looked up from his book, and stared contemplatively, either straight before him, or with a penetrating, oblique glance, across at his travelling companion.

It was now half-past ten, the train was due in the great London terminus at half-past eleven, and by twelve Lilla knew that she would be hard at work in the munitions factory. She was glad to be on her way back, and she certainly was the better for her holiday. Perhaps that was why she looked well to-night; well and young, and—yes, happy.

And yet poor little Lilla was not quite happy. As she gazed, with eyes that looked inward rather than outward, before her, she was thinking rather troubled thoughts. Her talk with Mabel Gasparin had disturbed her, brought the now vanishing past back—made her remember Robert—Robert, of whom she so seldom thought nowadays, though, when she did think of him, it was always with gratitude and affection.

If the dead are so much wiser, more understanding than the living, she thought Robert would sympathise and—yes, forgive her marriage to Cecil Sturges, especially if, as she hoped might be the case, Robert, in Heaven, knew something she had kept secret from Mabel. Cecil Sturges possessed a higher, purer view of what the relations of men and women should be than that of most people. Cecil's ideal of the marriage state was one in which the two concerned should join their lives together in order to afford mutual comfort and help the one to the other—nothing more, and yet how much more than many married people do!

He had prefaced what he had to say with a peculiar preamble: "We are neither of us very young," he had remarked soberly, "and it is better in such a case to be plain as to what one feels and hopes."

She had been grateful to Cecil Sturges for saying those brave, honest words to her. It had made the path before her seem so much clearer. Of that, however, she had not felt she could say anything to Mabel Gasparin. Mabel, as likely as not, would have burst out laughing. Mabel—it was sad to think such a thing about one who loved her well, and whom she in this last year had come to love so dearly—had a rather earthy view of human nature.

Lilla could not help feeling sorry now that she had spoken to Mabel Gasparin. They had both said things neither was likely ever quite to forget, especially if, as Lilla knew, deep in her heart, was almost certain to come to pass, she married Cecil Sturges. What had been said, what had been promised by her to-day, seemed disloyal to the kind, considerate friend who had spoken as if he was willing, only, of course, for her sake, to wait till the end of the war. She, Lilla, once she had quite made up her mind, did not mean to be as selfish as that. Cecil had said that nothing need be altered in her life. At first, at any rate, she would be out all night, and he would be out all day. But they would have a few hours together each evening, as well as Saturday afternoons and Sundays.

It was true that the thought of Robert, and of what Robert would have felt at the notion of her remarriage—and to Cecil Sturges—had troubled her a little as she had wandered about the great empty rooms of Appledean House. During this last fortnight these rooms had been as empty as when she and Robert had begun, not inauspiciously, their ten years' married life there together.

But, even if a little troubled, she had known right well that the kind of union she and Cecil Sturges had in contemplation would not seem a marriage to Robert—any more than it would seem a marriage to Mabel. Only Robert, in the Heaven his good life and noble death had earned him, would know the truth, and Mabel never would.

It was curious how her dead husband still governed Lilla Singleton's life. Take one little thing. Lilla was now poor—quite poor, for she had, in all, a little under two hundred and fifty pounds a year—say five pounds a week. Yet here she was, travelling in a first-class carriage, having paid, that is, twenty-one shillings for her return ticket instead of ten shillings and tenpence. And this only because Robert, many years ago, had once made her promise that she would always go first-class.

He had been shocked—sometimes she had smiled a little ruefully at the remembrance—because, coming back alone from the very house she had just left, the same day as Robert, but by a later train, she had come third-class. "You're never to do that again!" he had exclaimed, quite sternly for him. And she had promised she never would. It had been a very easy promise to make then, when she had plenty of money, and when she hardly ever took a journey by herself.

After she was married to Cecil Sturges, that promise would of course no longer hold good. Cecil, she knew, always went third-class. Cecil's income was six hundred a year, and out of it he allowed—good, unselfish fellow that he was—a hundred and fifty a year to his two sisters. Half her income would go on her remarriage; thus together they would have about six hundred a year, quite enough for two simple-living, high-thinking people.

She wondered if Bartlett would consent to follow her after she had married Cecil Sturges. They would be able to afford two servants—Bartlett and one other.

And then, as she thought of Bartlett, a very curious, delightful little smile suddenly flitted over Lilla's April-weather face. And the one other occupant of the railway carriage caught that smile, and wondered what had caused it.

From behind the large volume of Trollope's "Framley Parsonage," which he was reading with the calm pleasure only inspired by a book which is already an old friend, he had been vividly conscious for some time of Lilla's presence, wondering, with a quickening interest, who and what she was. She reminded him, in the same sense as a strain of melody will awaken a chord of memory, of a lady he had once known. She was of the same small, graceful build, and had the same rather unusual colouring. . . .

But he told himself that there the resemblance ended, for here, evidently, was a girl, going off to do some war work in London—yes, that's what she looked like, with her pretty, close-fitting little motor bonnet, and her very plain black coat and skirt—in mourning of course, but not war mourning for lover, or even for brother, she looked too gently serene for *that*.

Then suddenly their eyes met, and as he dropped his again on the page he had been reading, he won-

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dered idly if the little lady who knew so well how to rebuke a glance which, if not over-bold, yet held an uncalled-for measure of curiosity and interest, had aught in common with Trollope's demure yet fiery heroine, Lucy.

Darrell Carteret—for that was the man's name—had been through too many strange adventures, and had had too many hair-breadth escapes from death, and worse than death, captivity, to want to read of other men's adventures, either real or invented. But he had discovered that Trollope could lift him right out of the responsible, exciting, sinister atmosphere in which he was just now compelled to live and have his being. So, when he had an hour or two of enforced leisure, he read Trollope.

Suddenly the centre light by which the railway carriage was brilliantly illumined went out, and the train ran with a jerk and a jolt to a full stop.

And then a peculiar whirring noise, which had been barely perceptible while they were in motion, though Carteret, as a matter of fact, had been aware of it for some little time, became much louder. Lilla, startled by the plunge into darkness, thought the rather peculiar sound must be caused by a traction engine pounding along on a road hard by the railway line.

All at once Carteret, with a lightning-quick movement, drew up the centre one of the three blinds on his side of the railway carriage, and for a moment Lilla, too, saw framed before her a dark, shadeless landscape spread out under the star-powdered sky.

In the immediate foreground lay a great grass field, studded with hay-ricks. It stretched away towards a black gulf which she knew to be the lower, tree-covered slopes of Box Hill.

But she saw all this as in a flash, for her travelling companion, thrusting his bare head right out of the window, turned his body round and gazed up, skywards. "I thought so!" he exclaimed aloud. And then he drew back into the dark carriage again.

Crossing over to her side of the carriage, "There's a Zeppelin over the train," he said quietly. "Would you care to see it?" He had a cultivated, well-modulated voice, a voice which warred with his dark, rather fierce-looking eyes, and moody face.

"A Zeppelin?" there was an involuntary note of incredulity in the way Lilla repeated the words, and as she came over to the open window there was no fear, only excitement and interest, as yet in her mind. "I should like to see it very much," she exclaimed. "But are you sure it really *is* a Zeppelin?"

"Quite sure." The stranger spoke a little dryly. He told himself that she must be very young to take the news so lightly.

And then, as Lilla also leant out and turned her little face upwards, to the stars, his heart softened. She looked so slim and small—and she was in such imminent danger of an awful death.

"Oh, how beautiful!" she murmured. And still there was no fear at all, only wondering pleasure and a thrill of delight, in her low, clear voice.

High up, almost looking as if it were itself a greater star, the airship hung 'twixt heaven and earth. But as she gazed at it, fascinated, the luminous shape gradually became bigger and bigger. And from appearing like a small golden trout, it grew into a long, broad, silvery bar of light, while the whirring sounds that bore down on that stretch of peaceful English country, on those now grey-green fields, yellowing woods, and red-roofed homesteads, became louder and more menacing.

For the first time a feeling of something like fearsome awe stole over Lilla's heart. Slowly she withdrew herself into the darkened railway carriage, and, as she did so, from far back in the train there rose on the still air—so still, apart from that curious whirring, flail-like noise—the strains of a foolish music-hall song.

"I think," said Carteret suddenly, "that we ought to get out of this. It isn't what soldiers call 'healthy' to remain in this train. There's no reason, you see, why the Zeppelin shouldn't suddenly shoot down quite close, and bomb us at its leisure. To bomb a train is a far more justifiable operation than much which the Zeppelins have already done in this country."

Even as he spoke he opened the carriage door, and Lilla felt a rush of cold air envelop her.

Lilla's eyes were now accustomed to the starlight, and she had the uncomfortable sensation that on getting out of the train she might be seen from that menacing shape above. Reason told her that this was probably a delusion, yet the delusion persisted.

"Do you really think we had better get out?" she asked hesitatingly. "Is there any real danger of the train being bombed?"

"Yes," he said curtly. "There's every danger of it. Indeed, I must request you to leave the train.

It's my duty to make you do it. Perhaps I'd better go first, as it's a very high step."

He passed out before her, and leapt down on to the line; and then she could see him looking up, as if waiting for her, rather impatiently.

She, on her side, stood hesitating. Was it wise to leave what seemed a safe shelter? This man's notion that it was his duty to make her do anything contrary to her own idea of what was right or wrong was, of course, absurd, though doubtless well meant.

Then, as she stood there uncertain as to what she should do, she saw his tall figure move quickly forward and upward, she felt herself gripped by the middle, not roughly, but very firmly and strongly, and, before she could utter a word of surprise or protest, he had lifted her in the air and set her down by his side.

"Please forgive me!" he exclaimed, "but there's really no time to be lost. We ought to get away from the railway line as soon as possible. The Zeppelin is actually over the train now."

She looked up. Yes, she could see the great, death-dealing monster outlined opaquely against the luminous sky just above her. "Surely, we ought to tell the other people of their danger?" she murmured.

"It's too late to do that—— Look!" He turned as he spoke, and she saw that the guard was swinging himself quickly down the train, from carriage to carriage, locking every carriage door as he passed.

"Ought he to do that?" she asked.

And the man by her side shook his head impatiently. "No, of course not. It's idiotic! But he has charge of the train, and nothing we can do or say would make any difference. I'm glad *we* are not locked in, at any rate."

And Lilla, too, was glad now.

He looked over in the darkness to his right, with a rapid, pondering, appraising glance. "I think we'd better get over into that field as quickly as possible," he said.

He had taken hold of her arm, and with a strong, impersonal grasp he was hurrying her along.

They came to a wire fence. He lifted the wire for her to creep through, then, seizing her hand in a tight grip, he ran with her down the side of the embankment. And suddenly Lilla, too, caught the infection of flight, and she felt very grateful to this stranger for his unobtrusive matter-of-fact care of her. Yet she was still not so much afraid, as awed and amazed by this extraordinary adventure.

Louder and louder grew the menacing sounds, and even as she hurried along, running as she went across the hard, rough surface of the hay-field, she realised how terror-stricken she would have been by now had she been locked in that small railway compartment.

They began walking more steadily, making a beeline for a clump of trees in the further corner of the great field, but, as they put a greater and greater distance between themselves and the railway embankment, it was as if the Zeppelin was following them.

"It's surely moving over to our side," she exclaimed. And after a moment he answered, "Yes. I think it's coming more this way. But it's very difficult to tell."

Even as Carteret spoke, the whirring sound grew a little less loud, less insistent. He threw his head back, and, gazing upwards, saw that the airship had plunged up again and was hovering about—no longer over their heads.

"It's trying to find some special target," he said suddenly. And then, more to himself than to her, "And yet there's nothing about here that I can remember. We're between Dorking and Leatherhead—no, I *know* there's nothing!"

They reached the fringe of the trees. "I think we might stop here," he observed, and then placed something on the ground which he had been carrying over his left arm. "Will you please sit down on my coat?" It was a command rather than a request, but a moment later he condescended to explain. "With regard to any kind of explosive it's always safest to get down close to the ground. So if you hear the sound of a bomb falling, you must lie quite flat. It is easier to lie flat if you are already sitting down."

"Won't you sit down too?" she asked rather timidly.

And he said, "Yes, I will in a moment."

They stared upwards in a strange, fascinated silence at the Zeppelin zigzagging slowly across the sky.

"There was a rather bad raid on the East-end of London last night," said Lilla, musingly.

"How did you come to know that?" he asked, sharply.

"One of the women who work in a munitions factory where I have charge of the canteen, wrote and told me about it. I got her letter this afternoon. Her grandfather was killed."

She had hardly said the words when there burst on their ears a dull, thudding sound, and Lilla's companion exclaimed: "God! They're at it now!"

Unconscious of what they were doing, they both scrambled to their feet, and instinctively started forward from under the trees. And then, to their left, perhaps a quarter of a mile away, Lilla saw what appeared like a series of shooting stars fall, slowly, with what looked like a strange deliberation.

Each falling streak of light was followed by that dull, thudding sound, and a great column of white fire rose in the darkness, and after burning with fierce intensity for a few minutes, flickered down into nothingness. While the flame endured, the effect of the white fire was akin to that caused by magnesium, making vivid the green of the trees, and producing a wonderful scene of mysterious radiance and beauty.

"They're aiming at a building we can't see," Lilla's companion observed, "a building that's hidden among the trees, under Box Hill. It's probably a private house which happens to be brightly lighted up. There's no factory of a war kind within miles of here. People are still very careless about their lights, especially in the country."

And then the airship made a sudden dart across the sky till it seemed once more to hang exactly over their heads, and, as instinctively as they had gone forward, so now the two standing there moved hastily backward, under the shelter of the branches.

"Are you frightened?" he asked kindly.

Even now his manner was that of a grown-up person to a child. Putting out his hand, he took hers and held it in a warm, reassuring grasp for a moment. "I'm afraid you *are* frightened. It's natural you should be."

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"I am a little," she said in a low voice. And then she added, rather tremulously, "But it's no use being frightened, is it? One ought to remember always that we are at war, and one ought not to mind sharing in the danger. But if—if we get through all right, I shall always be grateful to you for having made me get out of that train. I think they're going for it now——"

"Do you? I doubt it. I think I was mistaken—they can't have seen it yet, or they would certainly have had a shot at it! But sit down again, please. And remember that if you will only lie quite flat on the ground it minimises the risk astonishingly."

She obeyed him, and he sat down too.

And then this man, of whom she knew nothing, for all that they were now thrown into such intimate contact, asked her a strange question: "Are you a Catholic?"

Surprised, she answered, "A Roman Catholic? Oh, no! Are you?"

"Yes," he said. "I am—not a good Catholic, unfortunately for me, but a Catholic. So perhaps you won't think it absurd if I ask you to slip this over your head"—he thrust what felt like a long, thin, metal chain to which a coin was attached, into her right hand. "It's a medal of Our Lady of the Sea. My mother gave it to me to-day because my work often takes me to the Continent. I should like you to wear it, just while we're in this danger; you can give it me back afterwards."

And Lilla, surprised, touched, a little amused, slipped the long, thin chain over her close, cap-like hat. "It's very good of you," she murmured. And then, "But not very fair to your mother!"

And he, in his turn, smiled. She was a brave gallant little soul—this girl, with whom fate had thrown him for an hour which neither was likely to forget. "My mother's old-fashioned. She'd be shocked if she thought me capable of protecting myself—at your expense. Besides, I'm not in any danger. An Arab soothsayer told me years ago that my only danger lay from water."

Then a silence fell between them. They were both listening intently.

Suddenly Lilla's companion spoke again: "Look here!" he said. "There's something I want *you* to do for me. I know a good deal about the action of bombs. In spite of my soothsayer, it's quite possible that I'll be killed here, sitting by your side, while you escape unhurt. I am engaged on some rather important secret war work, so I never carry any identification marks. On this piece of paper which I now hand you, I have written my name, *Carteret,* and I have put down a telephone number—easy to remember if you should lose the paper, for it's '1 *Victoria.*' If you should get back to London without me, ring up '1 *Victoria*' as soon as possible. You needn't say who you are, if you would rather not—just tell the plain facts. I wouldn't venture to trouble you to do this if it was only a question of myself, but of course it is not. If I do happen to disappear, the sooner it's known the better for the Service. Do I make myself clear?"

Carteret was speaking rather jerkily; he had heard an ominous sound, deadened by the fact that the

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bomb this time had fallen in a deep stream which flowed only a few yards behind them. He wondered if she had heard that sound too. By the quiver in her voice when she answered him, he knew that she had.

"I quite understand," she said quietly, "and if you are killed, I promise to do exactly what you have asked me to do."

But even as she spoke the whirring, flail-like noise which had seemed so perilously near, grew suddenly fainter. And with a greater note of relief in his vibrant voice than he knew, Carteret observed, "It's off at last—over the hill towards Leatherhead and Epsom."

They rose to their feet, and moved away from the trees.

Lilla looked up. Bewildered, she exclaimed, "Why, I can't see it!"

But the man standing by her side shot out his arm, and pointed eastward: "*I* can, but it's soared very high."

And then, all at once, she saw the Zeppelin too, speeding along, a tiny, sinister, golden argosy, across the sky. "I suppose," she said diffidently, "that now we had better go back to the train?"

He answered her, as if drawn out of a deep abstraction. "No, it's no good doing that. The train won't start again yet. I should think that every train on every line round London will be held up for hours. Be sure that our Zeppelin is not the only Zeppelin come over to-night. As a matter of fact"—and though they were all alone in that great field under the stars, he lowered his voice instinctively: "Shall

I tell you a secret? Seven Zeppelins were expected to-night, but they've been so often expected that somehow I did not believe they would come." He went on, "*I* must be back in town to-night, but two courses are open to *you*. There's a good inn close here, called the Burford Bridge Hotel. You can stay the night there, or, if you feel so inclined, motor up to town with me. It won't take us more than two hours at most to get to London. With luck and a clear road, we might get in within the hour. They are sure to have a car at the hotel."

"But I thought that motors were not allowed to go into London when Zeppelins were about?" she said.

"That is so. But I've always a pass with me which takes me anywhere." He waited a few moments, then asked her, in a voice which had suddenly become diffident, "Will you come with me, or stay here, to-night? Perhaps I ought to warn you that if the Zeppelins get over London it may be unpleasant—possibly dangerous—there."

"Oh, I'd far rather go back to town. It's very good of you to allow me to go with you." She went on a little shyly, "I think you know my cousins, George and Mabel Gasparin? I have been staying at Appledean this last fortnight, and Mabel more than once suggested my going to see——"

"My mother?" he exclaimed. "How I wish you had!" He nearly added the words, "She's so fond of young people."

CHAPTER III

AT the time the half-hour that followed seemed to Lilla curiously unreal and dream-like. But every moment of it will always remain clearly, sharply stamped on her memory—even to the quiet walk across the dark hay-field, for there seemed no reason for special hurry as they made their way to the picturesque hostelry, where, according to tradition, Nelson bade farewell to Emma Hamilton on his way to Trafalgar.

The inn was in darkness, but every one was downstairs, and it was a curious, in some ways a ridiculous, scene in the old-fashioned coffee room, dimly illumined by one candle set far away from the closely-curtained windows.

They were there but a very short time, however, for Carteret carried through all he had arranged to do with extraordinary despatch, though he found time to force Lilla—Lilla, whose very name he did not yet know—to have some food.

And when at last they started in the big, old-fashioned, low-powered car which was all that the inn was now able to provide, she found that he had even thought of wraps for her, feminine wraps borrowed from the kindly hostess of the inn, to be returned the next day with the car.

One thing surprised her—"I'm going to drive," he said. "We're certain to be often challenged, and it's important that I should be able to answer at once, to show that I've a right to be motoring into London to-night. Would you rather sit behind, or be here, in front?"

Unhesitatingly she chose to be in front, and they put the man behind.

Before they had gone many yards up the dark and leaf-embowered road, Carteret turned to her:

"Do you see that tiny house on the left, up that little lane? George Meredith lived there, and last time I was in these parts I came on a pilgrimage to him. It's nearly twenty years ago. I'd only just left school, and I had got hold of a volume of his verse—I didn't even know he wrote novels—and then, it was very cheeky of me, I just went up to the door, and asked to see him! He was very kind, but of course surprised, and amused. I can hear his deep laugh sounding now in my ears—I like to think now that it was a laugh of pleasure. In those days—well, he was already very famous in a sense, but I don't know that any one as young as I was then had ever come to him just because he was a poet! He gave me one of his books—I was looking at it only the other day. I was disappointed at the time that it wasn't a volume of poems. But still, the book he did give me, 'Beauchamp's Career,' is a very fine book. He chose it because I told him that my ancestors were French. We talked of adventure—of adventure, and of war. I wish I'd written down what he said. How surprised we both should have been then, to think of an enemy airship over his house!"

They were challenged for the first time in Epsom High Street. There, indeed, they had some trouble before they were allowed to go on, and it was soon after they left Epsom that they began to hear the booming of great guns.

"They're over London!" exclaimed Carteret. And then he added, vexedly, "It will be all over by the time we get there!" And Lilla, catching the contagion of his excitement, felt a thrill of the same disappointment.

After that they were constantly held up, and their progress became slower and slower.

Lilla was surprised at the philosophy and good-humour with which her companion took these frequent, often suspicious and discourteous, challenges. Once he said, "I like to hear them—when a special constable talks of shooting one at sight, it shows that England's roused at last!"

When they were crossing Clapham Common, he turned to her: "Don't you think I'd better drive you straight wherever you're going to stay?" he said. "Your friends will have given you up—but still, they're not likely to have gone to bed to-night!"

And she said quickly, "No, I would much rather that you drove me to the factory, if you don't mind. But if it's out of your way—" then she exclaimed, "Look, look! What an awful fire!" The sky had suddenly gone red.

The next who stopped them, a policeman, remarked, "They say the West India Docks are on fire, sir. It looks like it, doesn't it?"

"We'd better try and get across Westminster Bridge." There was a thrill in his voice; and when at last they reached the bridge—the bridge now clear of wheeled traffic, but thick with a surging crowd of sight-seers—he stopped the car.

There were men and women, children too, of all ranks and conditions, and while the majority were fully dressed, there were yet many, especially among those obviously of the well-to-do and conventional type, who were in dressing-gowns and slippers—still wearing the garments which they had hastily flung on when awakened by the booming of the guns.

"No—it isn't the docks; it's somewhere nearer, in the City, this end."

Carteret leant over the side of the car and entered into talk with some of the people standing on the pavement. Yes, two Zepps had been over Westminster half an hour—or was it three-quarters of an hour?—ago. Then they had scooted off westward. The only mischief done had been in the City—over there.

He started the car again. "Would you care to go and see what damage they've really achieved?" he asked suddenly; and Lilla's face lit up in eager assent.

"Oh, yes, indeed I should!" she exclaimed. And then, regretfully, "And yet I feel I ought to go off to the factory, after all. If you will let me out here, I could make my way to Victoria very quickly. You see there are cabs about, even now."

Carteret did not answer the absurd suggestion. Man-like he felt irritated at what seemed such super-conscientiousness on his companion's part.

"Look here!" he said good-humouredly. "The nature of my work compels me to know a good deal about the munitions factories, and what arrangements have been made in view of this kind of thing. So you may believe me when I tell you that by now all the girls will have been sent home."

Taking her assent for granted, he swung the car round, down the Embankment. "The big fire is somewhere in the City," he said, "but this end of the City."

Lilla leant back. She felt free to enjoy every moment of the next half-hour. She believed Carteret had told her the truth. It was extraordinary with what trust this stranger inspired her.

The City? The City had been to her, till last year, a place where James Temple went every day, and Robert when he had nothing better to do. She had once asked her husband early in their married life to take her down and show her the old building, not far from Finsbury Circus, where the family fortunes of the Singletons had been established. But, fond and proud though Robert was of the great business which his grandfather and father had built up according to the best and most honourable traditions of British merchant trade, he had apparently thought his wife's request a very odd one: "Why, even my mother hasn't been there for years," he said, surprised. "It's quite out of the way of the big City shows."

As they drew near St. Paul's Churchyard they were challenged continually, and though they always got through after a few moments' parley, and the showing of his pass, Dare Carteret made up his mind that it would be best to leave the car. Walking, they would get along quicker and see more.

So, very soon, after mixing with a crowd of policemen, firemen, and plain-clothes detectives—for the general public were not allowed to pass through any of the narrow thoroughfares branching off the main arteries—they were threading their way along the byways and streets whose very names spell the romance of history to the lover of old London.

On and on they went, ever nearing the fire. At last a twist and a turn brought them opposite the opening of one of those mediæval City lanes shaped like a funnel.

It was at the narrow end of the funnel that the Zeppelin bombs, three in all, by some strange freak of chance had fallen, setting on fire but one building—that of a great modern wholesale house of business. Just below the high house now burning was an old garden, and a tree in that garden stood there untouched, scarcely singed by the fierce, licking flames.

Right up, close to the entrance of the street, a small crowd of sight-seers had managed somehow to get through immediately on the outburst of fire, and the police had let them stay.

Lilla felt inclined to clap her hands, so awesome, so exciting, so—so magnificent was the sight before her. She heard a woman near her murmur gleefully, "Why, it's just like the pictures, only better!" And an American chuckled, "The movies?—yes—just like that!"

Just then a cloud of coloured feathers, as if shaken gently off some giant bird-of-paradise, fluttered down among the flames, and Lilla realised that the building which was burning so fiercely had been a store-house of feathers—feathers for ladies' hats.

"Wait just here for a moment. I'm going to speak to that police-inspector over there. He's more likely to tell me what we want to know than if you come too."

Three minutes later he was back again. "There's been very little harm done," he said. "They think no lives lost—wonderful! A few yards to the right, to the left, to the north, to the south, and what might they not have destroyed!"

They stood there, side by side, a long time, and then at last Carteret cast a quick, measuring glance down at his companion. Her face was that of a child, entranced; her eyes, the large, rather deep-sunk, dark blue eyes, which were a beautiful and marked feature of her face, were shining.

"Perhaps we ought to go now?"

She started, as if roused from a deep absorption, and turned, obediently, away.

He led her, by a shorter way than they had come, to where the car was waiting, and very soon—too soon for Carteret—they were back in Westminster, speeding by the Houses of Parliament.

Just after they had passed the Victoria Tower, Carteret turned and said: "I live down there to the right, in a house which is, I should think, as old as any inhabited dwelling in London. Perhaps Mrs. Gasparin would bring you to tea there some day when she is in London?"

A few moments more, and they came to Vauxhall Bridge. "I think you said you live near here," he said. And she answered, "Yes, straight along the Embankment."

He drove more slowly, past a mean, ugly row of gaunt houses, and then by a group of rather countrified-looking dwellings standing back from the pavement.

Lilla touched him on the arm. "Here we are," she said. "That is Number 12, Ranelagh Reach."

He saw a patch of green whence rose, in the dim light, a small, square, white house, the sort of house which may be seen in almost any country town within a hundred miles of London, standing a little way back from an early Victorian High Street.

"It's a funny little place," said Lilla, smiling in the darkness. "It belongs to an American lady, an artist, who has gone back to America till the war is over. It suits me because it is so quiet, and near the factory."

"Then do you live here all alone?" asked Carteret, surprised.

"Yes. But I've an excellent servant, and as I am up all night I rest a great deal of the day. To-morrow—perhaps one ought to call it to-day—I go early to the factory, and come home after an hour or so."

"Why is that?" he asked.

"Because on Thursdays I only see after the savings bank there, and when we started it last winter we thought and hoped that there would be a great deal of account-keeping. As a matter of fact I hardly ever have more than half an hour's work to do after I get home."

"You go about eight, I suppose?"

"Oh, no. Not till half-past nine. I try to be there just when the girls have finished their first meal—their 'breakfast,' you know."

Lilla was surprised, but pleased also, at the interest Mr. Carteret seemed to take in her work. So few of the few people she met seemed to realise the very great importance of keeping munition workers happy and comfortable.

He jumped out of the car, opened the little iron gate, and they walked together up to the door. There she took out her latchkey, turned, and held out her hand: "I want to thank you for your kindness to me to-night. I'm so glad you made me go and see that wonderful fire—I shall never forget it!" As he remained silent, looking down into her face, she went on: "Perhaps we shall meet some day at Appledean——"

"I wonder, Miss Gasparin, if you would allow me——"

She interrupted him—"Not Miss Gasparin," she said a little breathlessly. "I was Lilla Gasparin once, but now my name is Singleton."

The request he was about to make died on Carteret's lips. He was exceedingly surprised—surprised and discomfited. What an odd, what an untoward, mistake he had made!

"I beg your pardon," he said awkwardly.

They shook hands again. She put her key in the door, and he turned down the path.

But instead of getting back into the car, he roused the sleepy man behind. "Look here!" he said, "I won't trouble you any more. I think I'll walk home from here," and he thrust a generous tip into the other's hand. "If I were you I'd put the car up somewhere in London, and wait to drive back till the morning."

Carteret crossed over to the river side of the broad, lonely road. It was not far to Westminster, and he did not feel in the least ready for bed, though he knew that a long day's work lay before him.

Mrs. Singleton? How stupid of him to have taken her for a girl. Of course her husband—lucky brute—was out at the front, probably in George Gasparin's regiment, and she was putting in the time by doing this useful bit of war work.

Carteret happened to know all about Allen's Munitions Factory; he had obtained the deputy managership of the place for a man of whom he knew something, and he had also arranged for a girl named Joy Ancret, the young sister of an old friend of his, a Mrs. Welland, to help in the canteen. But the fact that he was acquainted with one of the ladies working there he had kept to himself. The life he had led both before and since the war had bred in Carteret a perhaps excessive caution. He even felt vexed now to think he had told this Mrs. Singleton as much of himself as he had told her—and God knew how little that was!

He walked on, with long, even strides. It was the darkest hour of the night, but the stars still glimmered above London's shadowed lights. Now and again Carteret would stop awhile, and, leaning over the Embankment, gaze absently into the black waters.

He felt stirred—stirred and excited. What a queer, unusual adventure it had been! Many extraordinary, episodic adventures had happened to him in his life, but nothing remotely like this of to-night.

As he stared down into the moving waters of the Thames he seemed to see her face—the face which he had believed to be that of a young, ignorant girl.

He saw again the curling, fair hair, the delicately moulded, oval face, lit up by dark, shining eyes, in which the depths of expression should surely have revealed to him that she was not the young, un-knowing thing he had taken her to be. Yet she could not be very old—six-and-twenty, seven-and-twenty?

And then he told himself impatiently that there was no reason in the world why he should not continue this acquaintance with Mrs. Singleton. Indeed, he would be lacking in ordinary courtesy if he omitted to do so, especially in view of the Gasparin connection. Carteret had a very great regard, a high respect, for George Gasparin, and though he did not much care for Mrs. Gasparin, he was sincerely grateful for her unfailing, constant kindness to his mother.

Yes—he would certainly make a point of calling on Mrs. Singleton to-morrow. Indeed, he went so far as to remind himself that the man who goes out of his way to continue an acquaintanceship with a girl is always liable to have his intentions misinterpreted—he does, in other words, take a certain responsibility on himself. But that is not at all the case if the new acquaintance be a married woman. . . .

Many years ago, when Dare Carteret was only twenty-four, but a very mature, secretive, ardent-natured twenty-four, he had used almost exactly the same language, the same arguments, to himself. And though all the circumstances had been other, and the place where he had held that wordless parley with himself as different a place from London as could well be, his mind now shot back, with a touch of unease, to a very different moment of his past life.

He had met that other lady—the lady of whom the first sight of this Mrs. Singleton had at once reminded him—at a friend's house in Hong-Kong, and their meeting had altered and deflected his life for six years.

To-night, with a kind of stealthy, insidious insistence, that poor love of his who had now long been dead, came back, and stirred his heart to retrospective fidelity. He told himself, with an impatient sigh, that there was no necessity, after all, why he should call on Mrs. Singleton. He, and probably she too, would always remember this Zeppelin night, for there had been something very charming, very perfect about it; each of them, in their different ways, had behaved so well! But further acquaintance, between a man and a woman, sometimes dims a delightful first memory.

As Carteret turned down the street which led to the strange little dwelling which he at once feared and hoped must be his home till the end of the war—for there seemed no chance of his being ever released to take the part he longed to take in the Great Game now being played over there in Flanders—he made up his mind positively that, in so far as it lay with himself, he would not see Mrs. Singleton again.

CHAPTER IV

DARE CARTERET was now all Englishman. But up to that 5th day of August which changed the life of every human being in Europe, he had been a citizen of the world, and filled with a reasoned, amused contempt for what he regarded as the little ordered life "at home."

In the last twenty years—he was now thirty-nine—he had only twice stayed, for any length of time, in England. The last occasion had been six years ago, and he had then seen something, from the inside, of the London world—that delightful, frivolous, hedonistic society which was even then drifting so rapidly, and with so gay and unsuspecting an insouciance, into the whirlpool of war.

Carteret, owing in a measure to the popular success of a travel book which he had brought out with a famous publishing house, had become something of a lion during that amusing, brilliant season of 1909, and he had enjoyed the experience with a zest of which he was now ashamed. Nevertheless, he had then met with a little adventure which had not been agreeable to his self-esteem.

He had become strongly attracted to a clever, brilliant, high-spirited girl, who, on the very first occasion they had met, had announced herself his admirer and his friend! While being, as the curious phrase goes, well able to take care of herself, Angela Ancret had yet allowed him many pleasant privileges.

Though she was greatly sought after, and seemed to live in an unending whirl of engagements, she yet made time to see a great deal of him, and she had gone so far as to procure him an invitation to a great house party, at which—he sometimes thought of it now with grim amusement—a German Imperial personage had been the guest of honour.

And then, when he was just beginning to persuade himself that marriage with his delightful friend, even if it meant a measure of bondage, would not be without certain alluring compensations, Miss Ancret had one day confided to him the fact that she was, if not exactly engaged, then seriously considering the question of marrying a very wealthy member of Parliament, known to their set as Tom Welland.

Pulling himself together, Carteret had exclaimed, "But—but he's a married man!" and the young lady had replied, composedly, "He's a married man *now,* but he won't be next month, for then the decree against his wife will have been made absolute." As he had remained silent, she had said musingly, "I suppose it's because you are, after all, a Roman Catholic, even if not a goody-goody one, which makes you look so shocked at the idea?" He had answered harshly, "I don't think one need be a Catholic to find the idea shocking——"

The episode which had so shrewdly touched his pride, though not his heart, and which had left him feeling foolish, and angry with himself, had given him a kind of distaste of the modern girl, and of the modern woman of the world.

Yet Carteret had kept up with Angela Ancret, or, as she so very soon became, Angela Welland. She liked him too well to allow their friendship so to end, and he had not liked her well enough to insist upon its so ending.

When he had again started on the life of travel and exploration which alone really suited him, she wrote to him long, amusing, interesting letters, full of political and social gossip, and as time went on his feeling for Mrs. Welland became more really cordial and kindly than it had ever been; but she would have been indeed mortified had she divined that thankfulness for an escape played its part in the liking he now had for her.

Carteret had been in Siberia when the war broke out, looking after a Government concession for a group of friends whom he had made during the London season when he had been so pleasantly lionised. He had rushed home, fully intending to go out to fight. But when the India Office had heard of his arrival in England, a word had been said to another Office, and he had been caught up in the great machine which, if at the beginning of the war it worked ill and creakily, became, with what the enemy would have believed impossible celerity, the most formidable and perfect of the European Secret Services. Though he himself would have given anything to have been sent to the Front, his country just now had a better use for Carteret's special abilities. Indeed, it was a happy chance for his country that the eccentric, adventurous, unchartered life he had led for so many years had been just the right apprenticeship for the important work he was now set to do.

It was then that Angela Welland had proved herself a true and useful friend. At once she had be-stirred herself to find him quiet quarters close to his work, and it was a writer—one of the many unconventional, interesting people whom she assiduously cultivated in pre-war days—who had let to Carteret, at a very modest rent, a strange, delightful little house within five minutes' walk of the Government Offices in Whitehall.

It lay snugly hidden, guarded by a row of small, sunny, eighteenth-century houses facing a quiet street. These formed an effectual screen to a group of buildings running half round a tiny courtyard, in which stood a plane tree. Some of the low-pitched rooms were panelled, others simply whitewashed, and the whole had been transformed into a very comfortable, if eccentric, dwelling-place.

Carteret had never lived in a town house he liked so well. But it was characteristic of the man that he kept his temporary home very much to himself. Angela Welland had perhaps supposed that she would be entertained by him there, as she had often been by the owner of the house. But the thought that she would like to be asked never even occurred to Carteret's mind. His work, too, was pressing and absorbing. Any spare time he had when that work was over he spent out of doors, taking long walks, learning to know London (and there is no more curious, interesting place worth knowing in the world), and going for long spins far into the country in the small motor-car, which was his one luxury.

He did not even go and see Mrs. Welland often, not nearly as often as she would have liked, though now and again, especially when came the warm days of the second war summer, he would spend a pleasant hour or two of the late afternoon in the delightful garden of her London house in Nelson Square, or form one of a lively, agreeable little party gathered at the shortest notice, to meet at what the hostess called "a war dinner."

But Carteret had learnt his lesson. It amused him to talk with the often pretty, always charming girls he met at Victory House, and in the other houses where he was always made warmly welcome.

The girls all looked like little angels now, especially when dressed in the becoming V.A.D. uniform of one or other of the great London hospitals. But he felt sure, perhaps unfairly, that once the war was over they would all hark back to their old ways, and once more lure down the flowery path men like himself, men whom they had no intention of marrying, but with whom it was very pleasant to enjoy a serious flirtation or merely a laughing friendship.

Carteret knew that his mother, if silently, none the less ardently, desired he should meet a girl of their own faith, and, falling in love with her, form such a perfect marriage as had been hers and his father's. But that seemed impossible. Indeed, with regard to his faith, Carteret's position was unfortunate. More than once the fact that he was a Catholic had injured him greatly in a worldly sense, and yet, though still a believer, he had given up, quite deliberately, the practice of his religion. Perhaps that secret fact made him the more scrupulous in acknowledging and indeed, when it came his way, in proclaiming his adherence to tenets which, among great numbers of his countrymen, are still regarded with suspicion and dislike.

Much as he loved and reverenced his mother, much

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also as he respected her clear, honest intellect, he had never told her anything of his inner life. She had even known nothing of that revealing episode which had happened four years before the war; but though, when he was with her on a Sunday, he always as a matter of course accompanied her to Mass, he believed her to be well aware of his attitude to their common faith.

The morning following the night of the Zeppelin raid, Carteret, when in his bath, heard the telephone bell ring, and a moment later his servant's voice: "Mrs. Carteret, sir! She's 'phoned up to know if you're all right. They've heard very exaggerated accounts of our Zeppelin raid, down in the country, sir."

He called out, "Say I'm quite all right, and that I'll ring up Mrs. Carteret in about half an hour."

In less time than he had promised, Carteret hurried into the charming, panelled room which had been the writer's study. It took him rather longer than usual to get through to Baycombe, but at last he heard his mother's voice, clear, but quivering with excitement and eagerness to know what had really happened in London.

After they had spoken for a few minutes, Carteret stiffened to closer attention.

"Mrs. Gasparin is here, Dare. She's called on her way to the hospital. She feels worried about her cousin, Mrs. Singleton. Mrs. Singleton seems to have gone up to town by the same train that you went by, dear boy——"

He hesitated a moment, then, choosing his words, answered, "Tell Mrs. Gasparin that I met Mrs. Singleton—as a matter of fact we travelled to town together—and that she, too, is quite all right."

And then, as he hung up the receiver, Carteret felt a queer, triumphant feeling sweep over him. It was as if fate were forcing his hand, his eager, willing hand towards that forbidden fruit which he had decided the night before should and must remain out of his reach.

He walked across to one of the windows of the study and stared out—but the eyes of his soul were turned inward, on his moody, excited, restless mind and heart.

His work, that work which his foolish, if kind, feminine friends and acquaintances thought so exciting, so—so "thrilling," had become, so far as he himself was concerned, full of a grinding monotony, while yet requiring on his part an unceasing vigilance and mental alertness.

No wonder he craved for a mental diversion, no wonder he had welcomed last night's adventure, and enjoyed, to perhaps an unreasonable degree, last night's meeting! But even so he now told himself that, seen and talked to under normal conditions, this cousin of George Gasparin would probably prove a very commonplace person. . . .

It was now a quarter past nine. He was not due in Whitehall till ten, at the earliest, and in the matter of coming and going he was very much his own master. There was his bag waiting for him at Victoria, and also, of course, there must be luggage there belonging to Mrs. Singleton. . . .

Half an hour later Carteret's small car was standing before Number 12, Ranelagh Reach, and he was carrying a little trunk marked with the initials L. S. up the path which led to the prim front door.

He rang the bell.

"Can I see Mrs. Singleton?" he asked abruptly.

Bartlett hesitated. "Well, sir, you can't see her *now,* for Mrs. Singleton isn't up yet. As a matter of fact, I haven't waked her. She came home very late last night."

"Oh!—very well." He felt absurdly disappointed. "Will you kindly tell her that as I had to get my own luggage at Victoria, I thought it would save her trouble for me to get hers too."

Between twelve and one o'clock there came a sharp, familiar knock at Lilla's bedroom door, and though she was still half asleep, she started violently. In some queer way she thought the sound might be caused by a bomb, and that though she knew quite well it was only Bartlett's knock. "Come in!" she cried, and opening her eyes, sat up in bed.

Bartlett brought a telegram on a salver to the side of the bed. "I opened the telegram, ma'am," she said dubiously, "but I expect you'll want to send the answer yourself."

"Hear there has been a bad raid in London. Suppose you to have been at the factory. Feel very anxious. CECIL."

And a reply paid form.

Lilla felt irritated, unreasonably so, as she scribbled on the form the words:

"Quite all right. Was not at the factory last night.
"LILLA SINGLETON."

Bartlett lingered a moment. "A gentleman came this morning, ma'am, with your trunk. He asked if he could see you, but I told him you were still asleep, ma'am."

"What time was that?" asked Lilla. There came a little colour into her cheeks.

"It was quite early, ma'am—before ten o'clock."

But even then Bartlett did not go down with the telegram—"I'm sorry to say that I'm afraid I'll have to go away for a few days, ma'am. I've got my sister ill. I didn't want to trouble you about it before you came home, but she wrote to me on Friday. I should be much obliged if you could let me go this afternoon. I've seen a day-woman who, I think, might do my work just for a few days. She doesn't seem much of a cook, but she's the best I could get in this funny kind of neighbourhood."

Poor Bartlett looked worried, though she knew that this was not the sort of occurrence which would unreasonably disturb her present mistress.

"I'm sure she'll do very well," said Lilla kindly. "Go off as soon as you can, and stay away as long as you like, Bartlett. There are so many restaurants round about Victoria Station that I can always have my dinner out."

Lilla was sorry she did not know Mr. Carteret's address. She would have liked to write him a note and thank him for his kindness in bringing her luggage. She was surprised that he had thought of it.

After she had got up, she suddenly saw on her dressing-table, the long, thin gold chain and exquisite, delicately enamelled medal, which she had taken off, mechanically, the night before. She reddened—uncomfortably. How could she have forgotten to give Mr. Carteret back this—this—she hardly liked to call it a charm? Luckily Mabel would know his address in London.

Tired and languid, yet feeling uneasy and excited, Lilla spent the whole of the afternoon indoors. Every sudden sound made her start violently, and she began to look forward with a sense of apprehension to the coming night. She thought it almost certain the Zeppelins would come again.

While she was trying to eat the ill-cooked little evening meal Bartlett's substitute had prepared for her, the woman brought up Cecil Sturges' daily letter —a letter of course written yesterday, before the raid on London.

Lilla read it with impatience. It described, very long-windedly she thought, a walk he had been over the Fells, and twice he paused to say how much he would have enjoyed her company on his expedition.

Of the war there was not a word. But then Cecil never had been very much interested in the war. Lilla had always thought that rather odd. Still, as all the other people round her, even Bartlett, talked and thought only of the war, she had sometimes found Cecil's aloofness from what was going on in Flanders, in France, and in Gallipoli, soothing rather than otherwise. But what had happened to her last night had somehow brought the war very near to Lilla—it made her feel "in it" in a sense she had never felt before, and her heart, and conscience too, welcomed the sensation.

She glanced over the closely-written sheets to assure herself that there was nothing that required an immediate answer, and then she put Cecil Sturges' letter down, only half-read, on the table. He would understand that she had been in no mood to write to-day.

And then, all at once, she changed her mind about writing to him. She would write now, and get it over.

Lilla had only brought one piece of furniture away with her from "Number 19." That was a writing-table which had been bought with a cheque given her, as a wedding present, by her trustee. On it there had always stood a small photograph of her husband as a boy, a miniature of her mother, taken when her mother was still young, and pretty as Lilla was pretty now, and a little water-colour sketch of her brother's first baby. She had always had these three little frames on her writing-table, and they were now opposite to her, as she sat trying to invent a form of words which should make quite clear, while not in any way hurting or offending her kind friend, a resolution she had just formed.

This resolution was that it would be better for her and Cecil not to write to one another for a time. She felt as if poor Cecil's letters had got on her nerves. They came with a kind of pitiless regularity, and he always wrote four sheets, never more and never less. And there was a desperate sameness about his letters, or so she thought to-day. Sturges was a great walker, and in each of his letters he described the walk he had taken that morning.

But Lilla did not find it easy to convey her feeling on paper. She made three beginnings; then, seized with a kind of desperation, she wrote down the following words:

"I've been thinking a great deal of our talk—I mean of the last talk we had before you went away—and I can't help thinking that it would be very much better for us both if we didn't write to ane another during the rest of your holiday. You see, my work at the factory fills my thoughts, and of course it can't be interesting to you. Often I feel as if I hadn't anything to write about. I am ashamed when I get your long——"

Then she stopped writing, nervously aware that if she were not careful he would suggest that she only should stop writing to him, while he should go on writing to her. And so, instead of putting down the word "interesting," she simply put the word "letters" —"your long letters." And then she did add:

"Interesting as they are, they seem so absolutely outside my present life. They jar on me. I know it isn't reasonable, but, after all, one can't help being unreasonable sometimes. As I think you know"—her pen was now running away with her—"even Robert, who was always so good and so kind to me, often said that I was an unreasonable little thing!"

She read the letter over, and finally, half relenting, added a postscript:

"Of course I don't *want* to be really unreasonable. Suppose we write once a week?"

When she had finished the letter, sealed it and stamped it, she breathed a long involuntary sigh of relief.

It was now time to start for the factory, and as Lilla put on her hat and coat, she again wondered, a little nervously, whether the Zeppelins were likely to come back to-night. Bartlett had felt sure they would, and even Mr. Carteret had seemed to think it likely. It would be a strange, exciting experience if they *did* come, just when she was at the munitions factory.

Feeling a little ashamed of herself as she did so, she slipped the chain Carteret had lent to her the night before once more over her head. It seemed a pity that some one shouldn't enjoy what virtue there might be in that curious medal! To-morrow she would send it back to him, registered, "Care of Mrs. Carteret, Baycombe, Sussex." She knew he went down to his mother every Saturday, so if she did this he would find it there, on his arrival, the day after to-morrow.

After having so decided, Lilla turned her mind to the work which lay before her. As it was Thursday, she was going to the factory early, for it was Savings Bank night.

Walking along in the growing darkness, she wondered how Joy Ancret had got on with the Savings Bank last week, and whether the girls had brought Joy their money as readily as they did to her.

Joy Ancret? Joy was so modern a type of girl as to make Lilla feel at times as if she, Lilla, belonged to another, and an infinitely older, civilisation. Joy was at once so amazingly knowing and so amazingly ignorant—so kind, so unashamedly affectionate, and yet—yes, so heartless!

Joy had "come out" in the spring of 1914, and most of the quite young men with whom she had danced that delightful first season away, now lay in Flemish earth; and the others, those few who had the good fortune to be alive, unwounded, and still "fit," were all over there, or in Gallipoli, going in and out of the trenches with an unceasing and terrible monotony. Yet the girl seemed quite unaffected by all the tragedy, the heroism, the pride, and the mourning, which made up the England in which she now lived.

True, Joy Ancret "did her bit," for she worked through the whole night, four times a week, at this canteen of which Lilla Singleton had charge. On the whole she came very regularly, but there was one thing she could not resist. When the mother, or married sister, of some boy back from the Front for a few hours, gave one of those simple, rather pathetic little dances, which became, in the first winter of the war, a feature of young London life, a little note would be left at the canteen, explaining that Miss Ancret was unavoidably prevented from coming that evening. But she generally found a substitute, as often as not her own maid, a staid woman who used to bring her to, and fetch her from, the munitions factory.

Joy Ancret lived with an elder sister, a certain clever, brilliant Mrs. Welland, whose husband, a minor member of the first War Government, was a great ironmaster.

Very early in their acquaintance, Joy Ancret had asked Mrs. Singleton to call her "Joy," and she herself had almost at once slipped into calling Mrs. Singleton "Lilla." And yet they had never become really intimate, for when with this girl Lilla felt old and, what is so much worse than feeling old, old-fashioned.

Lilla sometimes wondered what the munition workers thought of Joy Ancret. They admired her—so much was certain—for they paid her the sincerest form of flattery. They did their hair as she did hers, and they tried to dress like her; but not one of them had ever told her anything of their lives outside "Allen's," as they all called the munitions factory.

CHAPTER V

ALLEN'S Motor Works occupied a large space of ground abutting on the one side on a railway, and on the other on a long, unlovely street. The street entrance gave no notion of what lay behind the drab-looking walls, pierced with dozens of dirty-looking windows.

Lilla rang the bell, and a small door cut in the great door opened cautiously. As she stepped within the arched wagon-way, she heard the gruff old porter's quick challenge. But his face softened, as he saw who it was: "Oh, it's you, ma'am. Hope you've had a pleasant holiday."

"Yes, Tillott. Very pleasant, thank you. Everything here as usual, I suppose?"

" 'Twasn't much as usual last night"—he laughed. "You'd 'a been surprised to see them gells standing to their work in the dark. Some o' them shamed the men—that I *will* say!"

"When did Mr. Jarratt let them go home?"

"Not till just before two o'clock—though all the fuss, bar the shouting, so to speak, was over by a quarter past eleven. Some folks say as those Zeppelins sailed right over this place, but I can't believe that! When I looked out, one o' them seemed to me just over the Parliament Houses. But some says they never got anywhere near Westminster at all. 'Tis difficult to make out the rights of it."

She walked on, into the vast, desolate yard, which seemed, with its huge heaps of slag and scrap-iron, illimitably large, stretching as it did away to where long rows of lowered lights marked the railway lines.

The whirr of machinery rose on the still air, but machines and workers were all shut in the big, gaunt buildings which rose, isolated the one from the other, though connected by covered bridges, high above Lilla's head.

Soon she reached a wide shed or workshop filled with a brilliant, greenish light. It made the faces of a man and a boy who were working there wear a strange, ghastly look, though the illuminant threw rays as bright as sunlight straight on to the delicate, intricate machines over which they were bending.

Lilla hurried on, into what seemed to her the grateful darkness of a huge, unlighted, stone staircase. But as her eyes grew accustomed to the sudden disappearance of artificial light, she saw through the great windows the star-powdered sky, looking, as it had looked last night, during the Zeppelin raid, full of a shadowy brilliance.

On and on she climbed, her light, supple body scarcely feeling the exertion, till she reached the top of the massive building. Once there, she walked quickly through a number of unlighted, empty rooms —rooms where in peace time the ledger work of the motor firm had been done.

A short passage connected these rooms with the place for which she was bound; but when in the passage she turned sharply to the right, where a frail-looking iron balcony overhung what from up here looked like a tiny pond, in reality a broad piece of water, a survival of one of London's old canals, So clear and beautiful was the night that she could see the many towers of Westminster outlined against the luminous sky—in the foreground the square, Italian-looking campanile of the Roman Catholic Cathedral, and further off the Abbey spires, midway betwixt the great Victoria Tower, and Big Ben, with its now dead face. . . .

At last she left the balcony and, traversing a short passage, walked into a brilliantly lighted, closely-shuttered dining-room.

Forty girls were sitting down at the two long tables. They were just finishing their "breakfast," and, coming back from her holiday, it struck Lilla almost as much as it had done the first evening she had seen them there, enjoying their cups of tea, of cocoa, of coffee, their ham and eggs, their kippers—how strange was this topsy-turvy turning of night into day, of evening into sham morning!

It was a cheerful, pleasant room, with engravings and brightly-coloured oleographs hung on the pinewood walls. Across the end, nearest the door, a large kitchen stove had been built in, and in front of it there ran a long counter, on which stood rows of cups and saucers, teapots and milk jugs. There also were the curious, highly-flavoured dainties, tasty rather than nutritious "bits," which experience had already taught the kindly, fresh-featured cook were what the girls really preferred.

These fortunate young women, who were now eating and talking so hard, were making a great deal of money, and, unlike their foolish betters, who at that moment were beginning to economise in the least wise way of all, namely on food—they were enjoying, many of them for the first time in their lives, a really adequate dietary.

As Mrs. Singleton came in, several of the girls nearest to her stood up—an unconscious, involuntary survival of the days when they had been in service.

Between the two tables had been set out a little desk and a chair. It was there that Lilla would soon be sitting at the receipt of custom, but she saw that there was no need to sit down yet, for the girls were only half through their breakfast.

She walked up to the long counter, and shook hands with Joy Ancret.

"Oh, Mrs. Singleton! Oh, Lilla! I wish you'd been here last night! It was *so* exciting! All the lights went out at nine o'clock, and of course we all crowded round the windows waiting, waiting, *waiting!* At last, when I had begun to think we were to be disappointed after all, two *lovely* Zeppelins sailed into view. We didn't all see alike——" Joy laughed. "Some of the girls saw three—four—five—six Zeppelins! As for me, I saw only two, but two I *did* see. And then the guns! It was like being at the Front. There were some awfully thrilling moments. I'm sure one of the Zepps was hit—we could see the shrapnel bursting all round it. One of them seemed to be heading straight for here, and one actually *did* pass over the station——" She stopped, out of breath.

"Were the girls very frightened?" asked Lilla.

Joy Ancret hesitated. "They weren't frightened at first," she said at last. "But of course it did get on one's nerves—the waiting, I mean. And I believe in the workshops it was really disagreeable, for they were told they mustn't move, that they must hardly breathe—rather absurd, I call that!" Then with the abrupt transition to another subject which was characteristic of her, she said suddenly, "And, look here—before I forget it! Will you come to tea to-morrow? My sister's so anxious to see you. Rather too bad of you never to have come before, you know,—there'll be some quite interesting people there!"

Suddenly one of the girls at the right-hand table got up,—and Lilla, turning round, went quickly to the little desk and sat down.

She opened her despatch-box, took out the large book in which she noted the sums paid in, and placed a little pile of new, fresh Savings Bank books before her. They were put there to tempt those girls who had hitherto resisted all her efforts to make them save at least a trifle out of the good money they were earning each week.

The girl who had got up sidled to the table a little awkwardly. Lilla looked at her.

"Anne Pickering, isn't it?" she said pleasantly.

And Anne Pickering nodded shamefacedly. "I can't only spare a shilling this week," she said.

"Oh, Miss Pickering, that's very little! Did you put in anything last week? Let me see——" She took the little book the girl handed to her, regretfully.

"I'll spare two shillings next time. And please, ma'am, my friend—you know, Mrs. Murphy—she wants all her money out next week. You can get it out for her by then, can't you?"

"I can—but I don't want to! Why, where is she?"

"She was that upset last night that she had to stay in bed. Her husband, he's coming back next week for three days,—so they'll want the money."

Another girl, a tall, handsome, gipsy-like creature, had come up, and stood listening.

"Want the money?" echoed Lilla. There was a touch of irritation and regret in her gentle voice. "Just that they may blue it all, I suppose, Miss Pickering?"

Then the other girl broke in: "Why, Mrs. Singleton! I *am* surprised to hear a lady use such an expression! I shouldn't 'a thought you'd even have *heard* of blueing money——"

Lilla laughed. This was one of the girls who put away each week four to five shillings. She was one of the good ones.

Anne Pickering moved away with her book, and then this other girl—Polly Stott was her name—came forward. "I'm here for some one else, too. My friend, Mrs. Johnson—you know, ma'am, who I mean—well, she wants all her money out—not that it's much. She's sorry now she didn't put more away. Thirty-four shillings—that's what she said it ought to be. Will you make sure?"

Lilla opened her big ledger. She was not very clever at sums, but after a few moments she turned round: "Yes," she said, "thirty-four shillings. Does Mrs. Johnson *really* want it out, Miss Stott?"

"Yes. For, you see—well," very bashfully, "she's going to have a little child. She's not coming here no more. She's getting some housework."

"Oh, well, she has a good reason. And is her husband coming back, too?"

"He'll never come back," said Pollly Stott cheerfully. "She's a widow. He was killed—well, let me see now—he was killed five months ago, poor chap.

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She's got her pension pretty quick—thanks to *you,* Mrs. Singleton. She often says as how grateful she is—and so she ought to be."

"Yes, of course—I remember."

And then for half an hour Lilla was kept very busy. They all seemed glad to see her back, even those who refused every inducement to make them save. Her heart, too, was gladdened by the amount she gathered in to-night. Some weeks it was very disappointing. Once it had fallen to as little as fifteen shillings, but to-day she got in two pounds seventeen and sixpence—a real haul.

At last she glanced up at the big clock over the stove. It was a quarter past ten, and the girls were beginning to leave the dining-room for the shops. At the beginning they had only been given half an hour for their breakfast, but Lilla had pleaded for an extra quarter of an hour, saying she thought their work would benefit rather than suffer, and she had been proved right.

She stood up, looked round, and raised her voice a little. "Any one else," she said, "for the Savings Bank?" But no one came forward.

Wearily she began putting up her books and papers. It was curious how last night's experience had tired and strained her. She felt almost faint with weariness—glad, indeed, that this evening it was not her duty to stay for the whole night. She would be all right to-morrow,—ready for the long shift.

Suddenly the door burst open, and she heard a rather pompous, self-important voice—that of Mr. Jarratt, the deputy manager of the works—exclaim, "And this, sir, is the girls' dining-room. It used to be the rest room for Messrs. Allen's clerks. Very pleasant and airy, is it not?"

And then Joy Ancret, in her high, clear, eager voice, exclaimed, "This *is* a surprise, Mr. Carteret! Why didn't you tell me you were coming—then Angela could have come too? She's always wanting to see this place. And we could all have gone on somewhere to supper together. I have over an hour off, if I like to take it, just now."

Carteret smiled good-humouredly. "This is an official tour of inspection, young lady."

Lilla, startled, told herself that he had not yet seen her. It was almost as if he looked through the small, slight figure sitting at the table.

He turned to Mr. Jarratt, and said something in a low voice, and the deputy manager of the munitions factory hurried forward: "Mrs. Singleton? May I introduce Mr. Carteret? I notice that Mr. Carteret is already acquainted with our other kind helper, Miss Ancret."

There came a queer, quizzical smile over Carteret's face. He took Lilla's hand, held it for a moment in his cool, firm grasp, then dropped it. "I see," he said, in the dry, incisive voice which already seemed oddly familiar, "that you have charge of the Savings Bank here, Mrs.—ah—Singleton?"

"Yes," she said. "We've done very well to-night."

She did not offer any information as to the amount she had gathered in, and Mr. Jarratt looked at her inquisitively. He would have liked very much to see the inside of that large ledger which was lying in the open despatch-box.

"Some of the girls are making up to four pounds a week," he said. "I can't say I approve of it myself! What will happen after the war?—that's what I asks myself, and what a good many people wiser than I ask themselves now, Mr. Carteret!"

Joy Ancret had come round the long food-laden counter. She was now standing with the two men, enjoying the little break in the monotony of her long night's work. "I say"—unceremoniously she was leading Carteret aside, and Lilla heard her go on: "Angela wants you to be *sure* and come in to-morrow. You got her note, didn't you?"

Lilla could not hear his answer, but Joy's clear voice rang out again: "Well, mind you *do* come. Never mind how late! We've got General Norton coming—he's arriving to-morrow morning straight from G.H.Q. Angela's putting him up for the whole week. And he's been at the French Head Quarters lately, so he's sure to have the kind of information all of you are always dying to hear!"

Lilla sat down again. She pretended to busy herself with some of the little Savings Bank books. She was quite ready to go now, but she meant to wait till the two men had left the room. Somehow it gave her a kind of shock to find that her fellow-traveller, her comrade of last night, was on such intimate terms of laughing friendship with Joy Ancret. It did not fit in with what she thought she knew of him.

As Carteret walked away from the dining-room, the manager observed, "It's wonderful what women are doing now, sir, quite wonderful! I never did believe, for my part, that we'd ever get girls to become used to our sort of machinery, but they took to it as we're told ducks take to water. And it isn't the girls only—— Look at the young ladies! Now Miss Ancret there—she's sister-in-law to a member of Parliament, yet here she comes, night in and night out!"

"And the other lady?" asked Carteret abruptly.

"The other lady, sir? Mrs. Singleton? I ought to have mentioned her first by rights, for she's the head of the canteen. Yes, sir—she really *is* a wonderful little lady, Mrs. Singleton is. She's what they call a war widow; and instead of cherishing her grief, so to speak, she just comes here, and does her bit! Having her has made a great difference to us, for the girls didn't like her predecessor. She started the Savings Bank too, a first-class idea, that's being taken up elsewhere, I'm told. It's the Savings Bank evening to-night. One evening a week Mrs. Singleton comes early. The rest of the nights, Sundays included, sir, she's here from twelve, midnight, till ten the next morning. I've come in more than once and found her scrubbing the tables,—which by rights she ought not to do."

And then, for they had now come to the top of the stone staircase, the manager stopped: "You go right down there, Mr. Carteret," he said. "I think you know your way. Perhaps you'll excuse me coming down along with you."

And Carteret said, "Of course—of course! I'm very much obliged to you. And I may be looking in again some other time——"

"Always welcome—always welcome!" said the cheerful, garrulous little man; and he disappeared through a door to the left, the door which led to the bridge connecting this building with the great workshops.

The door was hardly closed on the two men before Joy Ancret burst out, "Oh, Lilla! He's *such* an interesting man—Dare Carteret, I mean. He's a very old friend of my sister. She knew him long before the war, in fact before she married. They used to call him 'the Giaour' in her set. He's been to ever so many places where no one else has ever been. He went from India to Mecca, disguised as a pilgrim, and then he wrote a book about it all. I've not read it, but I believe it's awfully good. And now he's doing tremendously important secret service work. After the war he'll tell us all about it, but he can't say anything *now,* of course. One of the Ministers told Angela that he's the best man they've got in the Intelligence Department. Don't you think he has a very extraordinary face—not good-looking exactly, but—well, unlike anybody else that I've ever seen? His eyes are so queer—they're so piercing and bright."

Lilla got up. "I feel as if I ought to stop and help you clear away," she said wearily. "But I am really very tired, and I suppose Miss Lester will be coming on in a few minutes?"

"Yes, of course she will. She ought to have been here by now. You *do* look tired, poor dear—but don't forget to-morrow!"

Lilla walked out of the brightly-lighted room into the grateful darkness of the empty spaces leading to the stone staircase. She did indeed feel very tired, and not only tired, but depressed. Somehow she was

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sorry that she had seen Mr. Carteret again. It would have been pleasanter only to remember him as the kind, considerate, trust-inspiring comrade and companion on what must always remain as an outstanding experience of her life.

And then, suddenly, she felt a little thrill of acute annoyance and of self-reproach. How odd he must have thought her—how odd that she had never alluded to his medal, the medal she actually still wore now, round her neck! Still, she could not have handed it to him in front of Joy Ancret—Joy, who did not know what reticence or—or—Lilla hardly knew what word to choose—what delicacy, meant. Joy would at once have asked her endless questions, and would not have been content till she had dragged out of her the whole story of last night, and of last night's happenings.

Lilla walked slowly down the great stone staircase. It was almost eerily quiet, and yet she knew she was in the midst of a tremendously busy hive of human bees, all working breathlessly, hastening all they knew to perfect the engines of death. By listening intently she could just hear the whirr of the machinery, but the peculiar sound seemed to come from very far away.

At last she reached the lowest but one of the five landings, and Carteret's tall figure suddenly stepped out of the deep shadow, and stood before her, barring the way.

"I want to know how you feel after last night," he said quietly. "And also if I brought the whole of your luggage quite safely to your house? I couldn't be sure, you see, though I brought the only thing that had come, unclaimed, from Appledean station."

Before she could answer, he had taken the despatch-box out of her hand. "This is much too heavy for you," he said sternly. "Surely you don't carry this all the way home every Thursday evening?"

"I generally take the tramway from Victoria," she answered, a little nervously. But her heart was filled with a queer gladness. It was almost as if she had found again a friend who had been lost.

As they passed through the shed which was filled with the brilliant, greenish illuminant which throws the clearest light of all, Lilla drew her veil down over her face. Somehow she did not want her companion to see her looking as she knew they must both be looking in that sinister light; but as they walked into the dark, deserted courtyard, she put her veil up again.

"Mr. Carteret?"

He stopped short—"Yes?"

"Your medal?—I'm so sorry I forgot to give it you back last night! But I've got it here——" She was wondering whether she could take the chain off her neck without his being aware that she had worn it again to-night.

But, "I meant you to keep it," he said shortly, "at any rate till the end of the war. I'll get another medal. I couldn't wear a chain like that!" She felt that he was smiling in the darkness. "I hope you'll accept both the chain and the medal as a little memento of our last night's adventure."

There seemed nothing to do but to thank him, a little shamefacedly.

She asked, "Do you think 'they' are coming again to-night?"

"I think they'll have a try for it, but I believe they'll be turned back."

They passed in together under the arch, and Carteret opened the small door for her to go through.

In the street was a small low car, with just space in it for two people, the driver and one other.

"Would you feel inclined to go up with me to Soho," he said suddenly, "and have a little supper in a place I know? It won't delay us long. Isn't it rather a long time since you had dinner?" And as she did not answer at once, he said eagerly, "It would be so kind of you to come——"

And, rather to her own surprise, Lilla smiled and answered, "Would it? Then I will."

Perhaps because of the unnaturally conventional life she had led for so many years, Lilla Singleton knew curiously little of the world and of its ways. The fact that Mabel Gasparin was so intimate a friend of Mr. Carteret's mother seemed to make his rather unconventional proposal less peculiar than it otherwise would have been. Besides—so she argued with herself, quickly, secretly—she was no longer a girl, and twice in the old days, after she had been to the Opera with Cecil Sturges, they had gone into Scott's and had a dozen oysters between them. . . .

But the funny little restaurant where Carteret drove Mrs. Singleton was very unlike Scott's, unlike, indeed, any restaurant to which she had ever been taken before, though it did dimly remind her of some of the quaint little eating-places in Paris where she had gone with Philip Lark-Wright and Louisa seven years ago.

Here, as was always the case in Paris, there was a centre buffet heaped up in the French fashion with fruits, vegetables, cold meats, and flowers. The buffet was surrounded by cheery-faced young Italian and Swiss *garçons,* who bustled about, looking much more gay and lively than did the keen-faced, over-zealous waiters at the Savoy and the Carlton. For them, in the days that now seemed a lifetime away, Lilla, in her heart, had sometimes felt sorry.

The Rendezvous, for such was its name, was still very empty, for it was not yet eleven o'clock, but Carteret hurried his companion rather quickly through the front part of the restaurant, and so down two steps into a long, narrow, low-ceilinged room.

Once there, he walked, with the assured step of an habitué, across to a table in the furthest corner of all, by a curtained window.

Lilla looked about her a little timidly. Somehow the experience did not seem quite real; it was more like a strange, amusing, thrilling dream.

"Do you often come here?" she asked wonderingly.

And he smiled down at her. "Yes,—when I have to work late at my office. But I don't often come as late as this. As a matter of fact, the last person who had supper with me here was your cousin, George Gasparin. Also, once, this last winter, when he was over on very short leave, he brought Mrs. Gasparin to dine with me here."

And Lilla, with a queer little pang, remembered the occasion quite well. It had been some time in last March, and she remembered how Mabel had told her that she and George were going to dine with a man who was an old friend of her husband's. She had asked Lilla if she would care to come too, and she, Lilla, had refused, very decidedly.

They were waited on by a long, thin, dark-faced Italian, with bright, merry eyes. He and Carteret seemed to know one another very well, for the waiter, with a certain easy, respectful familiarity, pointed out on the menu those dishes which he thought were specially good to-night. And Carteret gave his order, scarcely consulting his guest at all; but when the little supper was served, Lilla found that the things she was specially fond of were all there—the things most women like, the kind of things one never gets at home.

The tables round them began filling up. Two or three of the women were in evening dress, but they were the exception. There was a sprinkling, but not more than a sprinkling, of men in khaki, and there were a good many foreigners. And Lilla told herself that if this was Bohemia, then Bohemia was indeed a very pleasant place.

They stayed there over an hour, and it was nearly midnight when they came out, but, to both of them, the time had passed as a happy moment passes. . . .

Carteret drove her back by the Embankment, going rather slowly, for it was almost pitch-dark. And when at last the car stopped before the little square house in Ranelagh Reach he asked abruptly, "Are you going to Mrs. Welland's to-morrow?"

And she answered, rather hesitatingly, "Yes, I think I will. Miss Ancret has often asked me to go there."

"Then I'll come, too. But I can't get away from my work much before six o'clock. Perhaps you'll allow me to drive you back from there? We might even go a little turn in Richmond Park first, if it's a fine evening—so bring a warm cloak with you."

As she passed into her empty house, Lilla Singleton felt curiously cheerful, and more, what she had quite got out of the way of feeling, light-hearted. That little dip into the Bohemia of Soho had amused her and done her good. As she went up the steep staircase, she smiled in the darkness. What a very, very kind man Mr. Carteret was! She had known him, how long?—not quite thirty hours—yet already they seemed to have become friends, and she had accepted from him a gift. But this last recollection was not wholly agreeable to Lilla Singleton. As to such matters she was old-fashioned and scrupulous. Looking back, she wondered at the unquestioning asquiescence she had shown in the matter of the medal which was still hanging round her neck.

CHAPTER VI

LILLA SINGLETON had become so unused to going out into any kind of society that the thought of Mrs. Welland's little tea-party filled her with a certain unease and apprehension. For the first time too, since her widowhood, she gave a little anxious thought to her personal appearance.

She went into the back room where Bartlett had carefully hung, in linen bags, the frocks which were a survival of the FitzClarence Crescent days. Lilla had kept nothing coloured, nothing of the kind she was never likely to want to wear in her present way of life, yet her heart smote her guiltily when she saw how many gowns she still possessed.

At last she selected a black lace dress, and a hat she had bought just before the war. The hat was a small "picture" hat, copied from a French eighteenth-century print. She remembered with a pang that Robert had not liked it. He had thought it what he called "dowdy"; yet she, Lilla, as she had regretfully put it by, had known that, if not in the fashion, as her sister-in-law, Jenny Temple, understood the term, it was certainly becoming to herself.

But after she had dressed herself up in the pretty clothes which brought back to her, with an almost uncanny vividness, a time which seemed to belong to a former existence, there came over her a feeling of such despondency, of such nervous fear of strangers, that she very nearly took the charming frock, and becoming little hat, off again.

She went and stood by the window of her bedroom and looked out over the river—the river which now, in war time, was so empty of all human stir and movement, the river which flowed on, massively indifferent to all the emotions of the poor transitory humans living on its banks. When she had first come to Ranelagh Reach the river had seemed to be a friend; now, on this lovely early autumn afternoon, it had become, not so much an enemy, as an indifferent acquaintance.

She asked herself, with a kind of shamed surprise, why she had accepted the careless invitation. From what she had heard—and she had heard a certain amount of gossip in the old days, for the gay, amusing doings of Mrs. Welland and her kind penetrate even to such regions as Number 19, FitzClarence Crescent, where they arouse mingled interest and reprobation—Mrs. Welland was not the sort of woman Cecil Sturges would ever care to know. Cecil, like Lilla herself, did not care for society, either in the broad, or in the narrow, sense of the term. He had once confided to her, many years ago, that the people who came and went about the Singleton family bored him exceedingly. She had heartily agreed, in fact that had been one of the old links of sympathy between them. They two were interested in music and in art—not in money-making and in gossip about people.

But, strangely enough, the evocation of Cecil Sturges, instead of making her less inclined to keep her engagement, made her suddenly feel eager for a new atmosphere. As she turned away from the window she told herself resolutely that she could not disappoint kind, warm-hearted Joy Ancret. Also Mr. Carteret expected her to be there. He had even spoken as if his going to see Mrs. Welland this afternoon depended on her going too. . . .

After Lilla had walked out of the now empty house, she suddenly turned back into the hall, and took down a black wool cape, warm though light, which had been one of Mabel Gasparin's many presents to her last winter. As she did so, she reddened; it seemed an odd sort of garment to take to a tea-party, on a warm September day!

But Lilla Singleton made one concession to the curious, uneasy feeling of hesitation and uncertainty which filled her this afternoon. Dressed as she was, she should have taken a cab, but she told herself, rather fiercely, that her ways must ever be those of a woman who is poor. And so she took the unlovely tram as far as Victoria, and there an omnibus bound for Chelsea.

Mrs. Welland, as is often the way with those who lead the fashion in their little world, always followed her own inclination and instinct, when arranging her way of life. Thus, having found in a remote part of Chelsea a charming old house set in a large, leafy garden, within easy motoring distance from her friends, while pleasantly distant from the very few bores whom duty and good-nature compelled her to know, she had easily persuaded her husband to buy it.

The omnibus conductor had never heard of Nelson Square, but one of Lilla's fellow passengers told her where to get out, adding, "It's not like a real Square, you know."

Lilla walked on till she came to what seemed to an imagination which was always perhaps a little too much on the look-out for the unusual, a stretch of primeval woodland. There were high trees and bracken, even wild flowers, in the space railed in; and through the branches of the trees she caught a glimpse of flat ground where some attempt had been made to create a lawn suitable for games.

Round part of this leafy enclosure ran Nelson Square, composed mostly of small, early Victorian houses; but occupying something like a third of one side of the Square, was a picturesque, low, red-brick building of much earlier date, a survival of the days when Chelsea was almost country. This was Victory House, the curious, delightful, spacious London dwelling of Joy Ancret's fortunate sister, Mrs. Welland.

Two motors drawn up just beyond the front door looked rather out of place in this remote spot. The one was a business-like looking car, dust-stained and travelled; the other was a luxurious electric brougham. The small, grey car, with which Lilla already felt on curiously familiar terms, was not yet there, but it was now only about half-past five, and the owner of that car had said that he could not get away from his work—that work of which the very thought thrilled Lilla—till nearly six o'clock.

She was admitted into a countrified-looking, octagonal hall, where she left her cape before following the servant down a wide corridor, hung with charming coloured engravings of old Chelsea, and so into the garden.

Like everything else about Mrs. Welland, the garden of Victory House was almost too perfect, too like

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a piece of brilliant scene-painting. This result had been achieved with the help of much intelligent thought, of a considerable amount of personal effort, and, last not least, by the clever expenditure of money—that magician which can do at once so much and so little, without which some of its modern possessors would be so acutely wretched, and yet which was never known to bring more than a transitory happiness to any one of them.

Three women and six men were gathered together in the lovely garden. Four of the men were in uniform, and of the three women Mrs. Welland easily stood out, not only as the owner—one almost felt the creator—of this delightful, original urban dwelling and pleasance, but as a brilliant and highly vitalised creature, sure to be the centre, the magnet, of whatever society in which she found herself. This perhaps was less the case to-day than usual, for all the people there were on easy and intimate terms with her and with one another.

Lilla's hostess greeted her very pleasantly, and with the kind of eager, confiding welcome due to an old friend rather than to a new acquaintance. But even so almost at once Mrs. Welland left her latest guest to her sister, and it was Joy Ancret who, a little awkwardly, guided Mrs. Singleton to a deck-chair, and introduced her to a pretty, plaintive-looking woman, who was already occupied in earnest, low-toned talk with one of the four soldiers.

Then Joy brought Lilla a cup of tea, and drew up close to her a small wicker table. But as soon as Lilla took up the cup of tea in her hand, the girl quickly glided away, back to the two men with whom she had been standing at the time that the visitor, who was in a special sense her guest, had been shown into the garden. . . .

And then, as the minutes, so long to her, so short to every one else in that garden, slipped by, Lilla began to feel a sensation of overpowering loneliness and depression steal over her. It was a strange sensation, akin to that of being a ghost invisible in the midst of a breathing, cheerful, living company of people absorbed in themselves and in their own concerns.

From where she sat she could see them all, as if on a stage, and not one of them ever even glanced her way.

Two of the soldiers, both Staff officers, were walking apart, at the further end of the garden, on a kind of raised brick path on which stood four large turquoise-blue jars overflowing with a profusion of brilliant purple flowers.

In the immediate foreground, Joy Ancret, looking very pretty and very girlish in a bright red cotton frock, was laughing up in the face of a tall, grey-haired man, with whose curious, rough-hewn features Lilla felt vaguely familiar, though she could not remember who he was. And standing by the girl, thoroughly enjoying himself, was a boy, a Second Lieutenant in the Black Watch, so plump, so round-faced, so ingenuous-looking, that it seemed as if he must be only playing at being a soldier, and yet he had only just come from that grim place over in Flanders, and he was due back there in a very few hours from now. It was his first leave, and he was living every minute of it.

As for the pretty woman to whom Lilla had been introduced, she had very soon got up, and moved further away with her companion. They were now sitting on a bench, talking with an air of entire absorption in each other.

Mrs. Welland, on the other hand, had soon come a little nearer to Lilla. She was speaking earnestly to the only man among the six there who was dressed as men dressed, before the war, when paying an afternoon call. There was a bored, rather cross, expression on his good-looking face, and he was listening, with a touch of very obvious discomfort, to his insistent hostess.

Lilla heard Mrs. Welland say, "I don't mind in the least whose staff he is on, as long as he's put on *some one's* staff! He really has 'done his bit,' as silly people say; and I *know* you can manage it, Jacky, if only you'll take the trouble!" And then Lilla heard the man mutter something, and Mrs. Welland's rejoinder: "No, I can't ask *him*. He's already done several things for me in the last three or four months. You know, Jacky, that I don't often ask *you* to do anything for me——"

"Oh, don't you?" came the rueful rejoinder. But already he was beginning to give way, though he made one more feeble effort to wriggle out of doing what she wished: "I've never even seen this new friend of yours! And I can't imagine why you're so keen about him?"

"Jacky! Haven't I already told you that I'm very fond of his mother? Besides, the fact that I want it done, ought to make you *want* to do it for me." Lilla saw the speaker smile up at her sulky guest, and that smile suddenly gave her the key to Joy's affection and admiration for her sister. It was such a friendly, confiding, intimate smile—the sort of smile which might well smooth out the lines on a man's face, even, perhaps, set his heart beating—a little.

"I'll see what I can do," he said, "but mind, Angela, you're not to count on my doing it!"

And then Mrs. Welland made a little mistake: "It might be worth trying to put Dare Carteret on the job, too. They say that when he was in Egypt some years ago, K. took quite a *great* fancy to him——"

The man laughed, not very pleasantly. "I don't think you'll find Carteret as amenable as you find me," he said. "He's a queer, ungracious kind of chap. I didn't even know you kept up with him, Angela!" There was an aggrieved note in the level voice.

She answered quickly: "There's a great deal about me you don't know, Jacky! But of course if I've *your* promise, I'll rest and be thankful."

Yes, it was a very curious feeling—that of being there and not being there, that of being in an eager, happy company of men and women and yet not of them. Lilla was not offended, and she did not care enough to be hurt, but she was rather surprised at their easy-going lack of manners. Still, even so, her heart was large enough to feel that it was good of Mrs. Welland to take all that trouble about some one else's son, some young soldier "who had done his bit," and who therefore deserved a rest—a rest, that is, by being put on the Staff.

And then, a little uncomfortably, Lilla began to

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ask herself what Mr. Carteret, whose name had been bandied just now between those two people, would think of such a—a job, for surely that way of getting some one on the Staff would be what some people call by that ugly name?

More slow, dragging minutes went by, and then, just as Lilla was beginning to wonder if she had not been at Victory House quite long enough, she heard the sound of a door opening—and Carteret walked into the garden.

Mrs. Welland at once left the man to whom she had been talking, and hurried across the grass.

"You're late!" Lilla heard the eager resonant voice. "But never mind, we're all here, including an old friend whom you haven't seen, he tells me, since—since —oh well, since the year *one*—I mean Jacky Thrupp! Jacky? Come here——"

The speaker was smiling a little mischievously, and she went on smiling as the two men who had once been rivals for her favour, for what they had then all three called her "friendship," shook hands, rather stiffly and coldly.

And Lilla? Lilla's heart was beating, hotly, uncomfortably. She was angry with herself. Why should *she* care whether Mr. Carteret were here or not? Why should his being there make all the difference? Yet it did. She no longer felt as she had felt before—unwanted, and terribly, unnaturally, alone, among all these strangers. Still, hastily she assured herself she was in no hurry for him to come up and speak to her.

And then she saw the man whose name she now knew to be Thrupp fall back, leaving Mrs. Welland and her newly-arrived guest alone together.

"I'll go and tell General Norton you're here. Meanwhile, *do* let me introduce you to Mrs. Singleton." She added in an aside, "A friend of Joy's."

She brought Carteret up to where Lilla was sitting, "Mrs. Singleton? Mr. Carteret knows all the things we're all dying to know—but you'll be a very clever woman if you can get anything out of him!" And she left them for a moment alone together, while she went off towards the two men who were walking up and down the brick path.

He stood before her, looking down with a kind of eager, glad gravity, into her face. It was the first time he had seen her in the daylight, and he discovered new beauties of colouring, of expression, of line, in this woman whom he now knew he was going to love. . . .

There came over him an absurd, unreasoning impulse to tell her, here and now, that he adored her! But instead he only asked, "Have you brought a warm cloak?"

And as she said "Yes," rather shyly, he exclaimed, "That's right!" and turned to greet the two men whom his hostess was now bringing towards him.

And then, at last, Mrs. Welland herself sat down by Lilla.

"I wonder if you've ever read Mr. Carteret's account of his journey to Mecca?" she said pleasantly. "It made *such* a stir when it came out, six or seven years ago. It was supposed to be the best thing of the kind since Burton's famous book. I once made him dress himself up in the costume he wore—no one could *possibly* have known him in it! Though of course there is something rather queer and Eastern-looking about him, isn't there? When I was a girl, he and I used to be great friends; but now he's the most difficult man to get hold of. He works tremendously hard, and he's doing very important Secret Service work. But he's one of the few men one knows who *never* talk of their job—in fact it's impossible to get anything out of him!"

"I suppose one oughtn't to try," said Lilla in a low voice. It was the first word she had spoken in answer to her hostess.

"Oh, I think one has a right to *try!* I don't see why one shouldn't find out all one can. London's been like a big whispering gallery since the war began. Of course you might say that most of the secrets aren't worth knowing,—but that isn't true of Dare Carteret's secrets. Isn't it odd how all the values of life have changed? We women—well, in a way we count more, but we also count infinitely less, than before the war!"

"I think we count much more," Lilla flashed out.

And the other looked at her, a little surprised. Angela Welland had thought this attractive, rather unusual-looking Mrs. Singleton just a little dull and self-absorbed. She had secretly wondered why Joy had been so anxious to have her here.

"Perhaps you'll think it very horrid of me to say so, but I've never thought very much of women—in the mass, I mean! But I own the Suffragettes *have* surprised me. I used to hate them so! They caused such a lot of worry in our constituency. You know the sort of thing—breaking up meetings, and so on.

But every one says that they've been doing such splendid work lately—And then the girls—look at Joy!" She went on more freely, for here at last was a subject on which she and Mrs. Singleton met on common ground. "My little sister's quite a clever girl, as you know,—at least *I* think so——"

And Lilla nodded eagerly, sympathetically. "Yes, she's very, very clever."

"Well, I used to think that all her cleverness would be wasted! She didn't ever seem to care to go on with anything. She only wanted to amuse herself. Now, when *I* was a girl I cared for a lot of things—for books, for really interesting people, and I even worked hard at drawing for a bit! As for balls—well, I simply *refused* to go on going to dances after my second season. There seemed such far more amusing ways of spending one's evenings than in dancing, always with the same men, and mostly, after all, with little boys. But Joy—well, Joy, in the days when she first came out, only seemed to care for the little boys!"

"She seems rather fond of one little boy now," said Lilla, smiling.

"Yes, she *is* very fond of him. She would have him here for the whole of his leave. And yet—well, where's the *good* of it? She hasn't a penny, you know, and he hasn't either. Lately I've thought Sir John Picton—he's Local Government Board, you know—was rather taken with her."

Lilla knew now who that grizzled, prematurely old-looking man was. "Is it true that he was a navvy?" she asked.

"Yes, I believe he was. But he's a millionaire *now,* and the P.M. says he's one of the cleverest men in the Cabinet!"

As Mrs. Singleton remained silent, Mrs. Welland said seriously, "But as for that poor boy, please don't encourage Joy to give him a thought—why, he's only a second lieutenant, and very few of them escape! I don't want my little Joy turned into a war widow——"

And then, as she saw a sudden shrinking from herself in the other's sensitive face, Mrs. Welland felt a pang of acute discomfiture and dismay. Why, of course! Joy had told her ages ago that this Mrs. Singleton's husband had been killed in the very early days of the war, at Mons or Le Cateau. How could she have forgotten?

But when one has made a *bévue* of that sort, it is always better to go straight on—apology only makes it worse. And so, "Yes, the war has been a *splendid* thing for Joy, thanks to *you* and to the canteen. I can see what a good influence you have over her—I am really grateful to you, Mrs. Singleton."

And then, feeling that she had thoroughly done her duty, she got up and called out, "Joy! Come and talk to Mrs. Singleton." As her sister came running up, she added, "Isn't it tiresome—Dare Carteret can't stay on to dinner! I made sure he would, but he says he's got an important engagement, and must leave in a few minutes. I think I'd better see if I can't get some one else by telephone."

Lilla felt a little pang of unreasonable disappointment. Then Mr. Carteret, when he had asked her just now about her cloak, was only thinking of the short drive back to Ranelagh Reach? It had grown a little chilly in the last few minutes.

With a mental jolt she came back to where she was, and to the people round her. They were all moving towards the house, and as she got up too, she heard the chubby-faced young soldier say rather disconsolately, "I suppose Mrs. Welland would like to get rid of me for a couple of hours?" and Joy's answer, "I'll take charge of you! We might go for a good, brisk walk till it's time to dress for dinner." And Lilla saw how his face cleared, and how happily he beamed.

The pretty, plaintive-looking little lady was walking by with the man to whom she had been talking uninterruptedly ever since Lilla had come into the garden: "I can give you a lift—if you care for one," Lilla heard her say, and eagerly he answered, "Thanks—that will be splendid!" and they melted away, together.

Then the grey-haired man, who seemed to be what Mrs. Welland had called so "taken" with Joy, sidled towards Mr. Thrupp. "Will you come home along with me?" he asked gruffly. "I suppose you've got to have a bit of dinner before going back to work, eh?" And Mr. Thrupp accepted the offer with a certain alacrity. He also was disappointed; he had thought Angela meant him to stay to dinner.

And then Joy, who was always good-natured, bethought herself of her dear Lilla—of Lilla, who, she knew, was poor—of Lilla, who was always going about in omnibuses.

"Mr. Carteret!" the girl called out, in the eager, insistent voice which was at once so like and so unlike her sister's. "Mr. Carteret? Why shouldn't you take Mrs. Singleton back in your car? It isn't very far, by the Embankment."

He answered formally, "I shall be delighted!" but he looked at Joy very kindly. Up to this moment he had thought her a very inferior imitation of the other Miss Ancret he had known in the long ago; but now, suddenly, he made up his mind that Joy, if less clever and brilliant, was perhaps more really kind than the other had ever been. Somehow he did not think that Angela, in the old days, would have thought of suggesting such a thing. And he was grateful to Joy Ancret for having made the way so easy.

Carteret knew most of the moves in that great Protean human game in which even the more skilful player of the two is often beaten. But he had never thought to play the game again. Yet here he was, making the first move, and feeling as if youth, that most precious possession which is only valued when lost, had come leaping back, quickening every deadened sense into pulsing life.

He had not yet quite made up his mind how long he meant to go on with this new game, but meanwhile, how delightful it was to be playing again!

They had driven across Kingston Vale, and now they were going, more slowly, through a little village which might have been a hundred miles from London.

Lilla had enjoyed every moment of the rush through the air, and she was filled with a delicious sense of well-being, even of exhilaration. But she also felt that what she was doing was so extraordinary that she

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could hardly believe that it was she, Lilla Singleton, taking, in the companionship of this almost stranger, what people were beginning to say should never be taken in war time, a "joy-ride." She knew that what she was doing was not wrong, and yet she could not feel that it was wholly right.

Suddenly Carteret turned and bent his dark, glowing eyes on her. And then, perhaps because he saw something questioning and dubious in her sensitive face, he said quickly, slowing down the car as he spoke, "I'm not taking you too far, am I? Have you an engagement to-night?"

She said hesitatingly, "No, but I thought you had."

And then he answered, very quietly, "So I had. My engagement was with you."

CHAPTER VII

WHEN a friendship, a close, sudden friendship between a man and a woman, is still only measured by days, the friends, if wise—and Carteret, at any rate, was wise—are not apt to question either themselves or one another as to whys, wherefores, and whithers. The fact that Carteret had at once discovered that Mrs. Singleton had no real servant just now, was an excellent reason for their always taking together that evening meal which, according to the hour they had it, might be regarded as either dinner or supper.

And then again the war made everything different!

Carteret told Lilla, and she was too truthful herself to doubt his word, that entertaining, in the ordinary sense of the term, had come to an end in London. As a matter of fact, before the 8th of September, though many of the people he knew were still out of town, Carteret had constantly dined out. But now he refused every such invitation, and many of those who called him friend felt truly sorry that the conditions of his work made it impossible for him to take even a little bit of dinner, without dressing, in their company.

But, busy as he was, and it was true that he had come back to find a sudden increase in one important section of his work, he fell into the way of coming every evening, sometimes early, sometimes late, to Ranelagh Reach.

When it was fine—and it was mostly fine during those long September evenings—they would go for a motor drive, occasionally staying for dinner at some country inn, though more often they came back, and walked from the garage to the little restaurant where, as Lilla sometimes told herself, they had first really become friends. Then, after they had dined, they would take a quiet, leisurely stroll through the dimly-lighted streets, till at last their steps led them to that deserted stretch of the Thames Embankment where stood Lilla's little house.

And at last, nay, very soon, there had come an evening when Lilla, with a shower as excellent excuse, rather shyly asked him to come in. After that evening there was never any question of their parting till it was time for her to go (and for him to accompany her) to the munitions factory.

During those early days Carteret simply took, unquestioning, what the kind gods gave him. After their third meeting Lilla had become part of his life, and he told her more about himself, his past existence and his present work—that work which he had hitherto kept so jealously to himself—than he had ever thought to tell any living being.

Till now, it had always jarred on him to talk of the war to a woman. He felt it too deeply, he resented too keenly the being deprived of his share in the actual fighting, to bear with equanimity the often gloomy discussions and futile criticisms which, during that long second autumn of the war, flowed and eddied in London drawing-rooms, and at London luncheon tables.

But with Lilla it was quite different! He felt that she cared about the war, and about the objects for which the war was now being fought, almost as intensely and, in a sense, impersonally, as he did himself; also that what she valued, above all things, was the truth. The way of her life set her apart from all the gossip, from the half-false, half-true reports which formed so much of other people's conversation and discussion. Her only source of such dubious information was Joy Ancret, and they were both far too busy, when working at the Canteen, to have very much talk of the kind.

Sometimes Carteret felt ashamed to be feeling, as he was feeling now, so well, so happy, and yes, so good! For the first time also, as the days slipped away, he began to feel a deep, abiding sense of inner peace, and spiritual content.

And then, quite suddenly, something happened which for a moment broke the delicious spell.

Mrs. Welland had rung him up at his office—a thing he much disliked, and indeed had forbidden his friends to do. (Though during the last few days he had been unreasonably annoyed to find that the little house in which Mrs. Singleton lived had no telephone!)

"It seems such a long time—quite ten days—since we've seen anything of you. How about dinner tomorrow? Mrs. Singleton—you remember? Joy's lady, whom you met the last time you were here—is coming, too."

Brusquely he had refused the invitation. The thought of meeting his friend at Victory House was unendurable, and he was surprised and vexed, too, that she had said nothing to him about it. But between them the usual relations between man and woman had been of late curiously reversed.

Hitherto, when Carteret had been on terms of friendship with a woman, she had told him everything he was willing to hear (or at any rate, he had believed so), while he had told her nothing. But now, while there was no fact about his present life which Lilla did not know, and nothing—well, hardly anything—which he would not have told her of his past life, had she shown a wish to know it,—of her, and of the existence she had led till they had met, he knew nothing—that mattered.

As he walked with long, even strides along the Embankment towards Ranelagh Reach, he told himself, with jealous pain, that she was unreasonably, unnaturally reticent. . . .

Yet only the night before he had felt as if he had made a sudden further stride in his intimacy with her. He had told her of his childhood,—a happy childhood, though he and his parents had been always moving about, from one part of the world to the other. And she, on her side, had told him something of her own quiet youth, and of her brother—the brother who seemed to be her only real link with the outside world, apart, of course, from the Gasparins. And yet—yet last evening she had known that she would be dining to-morrow at Victory House, and had told him nothing of it!

For the first time in that acquaintance which, though so brief, measured by hours and by days, seemed, nevertheless, to have become part of the very warp and woof of his life, Carteret went up the little path leading to her front door in a state of something very like bad temper. But when he saw her waiting for him,—with that eager, trusting, welcoming look on her face he had grown to know, and which so far had satisfied him,—temper melted into tenderness, its place taken by a feeling which Carteret had never experienced for any human being, save perhaps his mother—a really selfless wish for another's pleasure.

After all, why shouldn't the darling go to one of Angela Welland's amusing little dinner parties? It would be Dead Sea fruit to him, but he could imagine that Lilla, if in the mood, would thoroughly enjoy the novel experience, especially if Angela took a little trouble over the men she put next to her.

Still, he said nothing till just before they parted, hours later, at the door of the munitions factory. Then, as was his way, he handed her the bag in which she took the various things she required for her work, with the words, "Well, I'll come over to-morrow evening if I may." He added, trying to speak naturally: "And, if, as I understand, you're dining at Victory House, I can drive you there."

"But I'm not dining there!" She looked up at him, surprised. Then he was going, after all? Somehow she had thought that he, too, would refuse. "Joy Ancret brought me an invitation from her sister, but I did not feel as if I wanted to go there again."

He felt absurdly glad, absurdly relieved. "I refused, too," he said—and then he took her hand, and, for the first time, he kept it closely clasped in his a thought longer than he need have done. "If it's fine we might drive down to Box Hill, and dine there. We could easily be back here by twelve."

And happily she answered, "Yes, that would be very nice."

The spell always works more slowly, more insidiously, with a woman than with a man. And time to a woman is a far more positive thing than time is to man.

What is true of every woman was in a very special sense true of Lilla Singleton.

Carteret hated to remember that there had been a time when he had not known her. He had at once glided into that enchanted hour in which, according to George Herbert, a man may be happy all his life, can he but find it. But Lilla was always remembering with a little shock of surprise and discomfiture that this close, and ever growing more intimate, friend was a stranger, after all! Yet she had never known her mind so well attuned to another's, never met a human being with whom she felt in such instinctive, unquestioning sympathy.

Very soon, even when he was not there, it was as though his thought and care enfolded her. Often when Lilla awoke there was a note waiting, a note written in Carteret's luncheon hour, in which he proposed some plan for the same evening, or, maybe, simply wrote that he would be with her an hour later (or earlier) than usual. And there would sometimes also be in the letter, to which there was never a formal beginning or end, an interesting piece of war news, which, known to the initiated, was only to be "released" to the Press later on, if ever.

Lilla was proud of his confidence in her, proud as is a happy, loyal-natured child. She often smiled to herself as she remembered that Mrs. Welland had said it was impossible to get anything out of him. . . .

This state of things had lasted over three weeks before Lilla suddenly woke up to the fact that her new friendship, were it to endure, must modify her future relationship with Cecil Sturges. That fact, that knowledge, was pressed in on her, as so often happens, from the outside.

When Lilla had come back to London, after her stay at Appledean in the early days of her widowhood, not only every member of her husband's family, with the exception of her husband's mother, but also many of the Singletons' friends and acquaintances, had made their way to the strange little house which "Mrs. Robert" had taken in what they termed Pimlico. But after their rather vulgar curiosity was satisfied, with one exception none of them had ever come there again.

That exception was Lilla's sister-in-law, Louisa Lark-Wright. Apart from Louisa, Lilla's only link with Number 19 was Cecil Sturges. Cecil—good fellow that he was—often made a point of going to sit with old Mrs. Singleton for an hour. Thus, through Cecil, they all had news of Lilla when they wanted it, and they were all more or less aware that he saw her fairly often.

But Louisa alone had a shrewd suspicion of how things had stood between Cecil and Lilla this summer, and it was in order to obtain what she regarded as a little quite legitimate information that she made her way, late that September, down to Ranelagh Reach, though it was a long and weary journey from the top of Campden Hill, where she and Philip lived.

This call was the result of a talk Louisa had had with her mother the night before. Mrs. Singleton had heard from Cecil Sturges that he was staying away a week longer than he had originally intended, and Louisa, as was her downright way, asked suddenly, "Will you feel it very much, mother, if Cecil marries Lilla?"

Mrs. Singleton answered slowly, "I shall feel it so much that if they two marry I never wish to see either of them again."

And then, to Louisa's quick protest, "Not even Cecil, mother? I think that's rather hard!" Mrs. Singleton replied, "I can't help what you feel, my dear. To me, the thought that Robert's best friend should marry Robert's widow is revolting."

And now, when Mrs. Lark-Wright found herself in the odd, square little sitting-room, so unlike any other room with which she was acquainted, her heart failed her. Cecil was such a peculiar person—not really like an ordinary man at all! Perhaps the kind of friendship he seemed to have with Lilla was all he wanted.

She asked abruptly, "I suppose you hear from Cecil Sturges pretty often? Is he enjoying his holiday?"

And Lilla, rather guiltily, answered, "Yes, I think he's enjoying it. I had a letter from him a few days ago."

That had been all. Though Lilla had blushed, though she had looked unlike her eager, sincere self, when giving that commonplace answer to a commonplace question, yet Louisa had not felt she could probe any further. Still, she stayed on for a while, talking of ordinary things, telling Lilla something of her poor Philip's troubles. Philip had only had four commissions this year, and those only for "heads" of lads going out to the Front. As had often been the case before, during those long years of enforced intimacy with her young sister-in-law, Robert's elder sister felt grateful for Lilla's quick burst of sympathy and comprehension—sympathy so much truer, comprehension so much deeper, than anything Louisa could hope for, either from her mother or from her own sister.

At last the visitor got up to go. Lilla had twice glanced involuntarily at the clock. Perhaps she was going out, or expecting some one—Louisa had no wish to come across any of Lilla's new friends.

But as the two stood in the hall of the little house, Mrs. Lark-Wright felt an unwonted stir of affection for the little, forlorn-looking, black-clad figure. She bent her head and kissed Lilla affectionately.

"I want to tell you, my dear"—she hesitated awkwardly; "please don't be offended at my saying it—but you may be sure that Philip and I will always approve, and will always back you up, in anything you think it right to do. I never forget how good a wife you were to Robert, and how fond he was of you. I know, too, that mother was never really kind. Philip, in the old days, often said he wondered you'd been able to stand it so long!"

Lilla did not answer; she only squeezed the older woman's hand. But after Louisa had gone she went upstairs into her sitting-room and, sitting down, burst into tears.

Without in the least meaning to do it,—indeed, animated by the worthiest intentions,—Louisa had revived all the old troubles, the troubles which Lilla thought she had put behind her for ever. She felt as if she never wanted to see any of them ever, ever again, and suddenly she realised that among the people she counted as "them" was included Cecil Sturges.

Her heart, in its distress and in its illumination, turned to Mabel Gasparin—Mabel whom she had sometimes thought had such a rough, coarse outlook on life. She was deeply grateful to Mabel,—Mabel would never know how grateful! But for Mabel she would by now have been irretrievably bound to marry Cecil Sturges.

When Louisa had said that, whatever the others thought, she, Louisa, and Philip, who was Louisa's appendage, would back her up, and approve of what she did, they meant in her marriage to Cecil. Lilla told herself fiercely that never would she call on them for approval or support for that—or anything else.

When Carteret arrived a few minutes later, he saw that Lilla had been crying, and, owing to a simple combination of circumstances, he believed he knew why. Anxiously he debated within himself whether he should affect not to notice anything, or whether he should tell her that he knew, as a matter of fact, what had distressed her.

And then, all at once, he made up his mind that he would speak to her frankly. If what he knew to be on the point of happening had indeed taken place to-day, then it would be in all to-morrow morning's papers, and he could no longer pretend to be ignorant of it. Also, though he did not acknowledge the potency of that reason to himself, if he spoke of the matter now, it would give him an opportunity of opening up, in quite a natural way, the subject of his friend's past life, and of her relations, if not to her dead husband, then to that husband's family.

Only once had Lilla mentioned the Singletons to Dare Carteret. It had been very early in their acquaintance, and she had explained that she could not see him on a particular evening as she was having supper with—"my sister-in-law, Mrs. Lark-Wright."

Carteret himself was heavy-hearted to-night, but for what most people would have thought quite an insufficient reason—simply that his work was about to take him away from London for four or five days. He was starting this very night for Holland; a month ago he would have welcomed the change of scene, if not of thought.

They sat down, and Lilla waited, as was her usual way, for him to speak.

She had seen that Carteret looked preoccupied, moody, unlike himself. He had not brought the car—perhaps that meant that he would have to go back almost at once to his work. That had happened twice before, and each time he had been, so it had seemed to Lilla at the time, unreasonably put out, and disappointed—disappointed perhaps that he was disappointing her.

At last, "I am aware," he said feelingly, "of what has distressed you to-day. I have known of this matter for some time, but I hoped, up to the last moment, that a public prosecution might be avoided. But for that, I should have prepared you for what I fear must have been a very painful shock."

She gazed at him with growing surprise. "I don't know what you mean," she answered falteringly. "My sister-in-law has been here, and that, rather foolishly, upset me. Also I've had a long day—I couldn't sleep when I got home this morning." She wanted to excuse her state of depression to herself, as well as to him.

It was his turn to feel uncomfortable and surprised, but he could not now draw back. Abruptly he said, "There's going to be a Government prosecution of Mr. James Temple, the head of the Singleton firm, which was founded, I understand, by your husband's father."

"A prosecution?" repeated Lilla, incredulously.

She knew nothing of legal matters, but the word "prosecution" frightened her. It seemed to threaten not only danger, but disgrace.

And then, both physically and mentally, she straightened herself. She owed loyalty to the Singleton family, and more especially to the old firm. Robert had been so proud of the great business his father had built up.

"There must be some mistake," she said firmly. "I never liked James Temple, so I'm quite impartial, and I ask you to believe that he is the most upright and honest, if narrow-minded and disagreeable, of men! My husband had a great opinion of his business capacity, and I know that he is very highly thought of in the City. He was against the war, but then a good many people of his sort were against the war,—at first."

"My husband"—the two quietly spoken words echoed in Carteret's ears, and filled him with a sick feeling of savage, if retrospective, jealousy. But all he said was:

"The facts are only too clear. There is no doubt—of course I am telling you this in strict confidence—that Mr. Temple has been dealing, over long months, with the enemy. In fact it's a very serious case, so serious, so—so disgraceful, that if it had been in any way possible a public prosecution would have been avoided. Of course I've known about it for some time, but I only lately associated your name with that of the firm of which this Mr. Temple is managing director. I thought, seeing that something had troubled you, that perhaps the warrant for his arrest had already been executed. If it has not, I must ask you to keep the facts I have told you absolutely to yourself."

"I promise you I will."

He saw that she looked troubled—troubled and astonished, rather than acutely dismayed.

"Are you still on very close terms with those people—I mean the Singleton family? I gather—forgive me for saying so—that you had very little in common with them."

She looked across at him, surprised at his intuition, yet not resenting it—but he avoided her glance. "Yes, that's true. I had very, very little in common with them," she said.

Then she stopped, and hesitated, painfully. There had swept over her mind a sudden feeling that she must be fair, and, above all, scrupulously loyal, to Robert's memory. So, "My husband was very unlike

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the rest of his family," she said in a low, troubled tone. "He was a friend of my brother—that was how I first met him. But his mother never liked me, and as we had to live with her, I was not happy. I hadn't a friend among them. The only one who even tried to be kind was Mrs. Lark-Wright, my husband's elder sister. And of course I had nothing really in common with her. I daresay I was unreasonable——"

She was now speaking very quickly, her voice toneless, unlike itself. But she went on, desperately, with Carteret looking away from her, staring out into the gathering twilight: "Robert—I mean my husband—was always very good to me. But for him I could not have endured the life I was made to lead. Of course he made all the difference."

She had never spoken to any one, not even to Mabel, with the frankness with which she was speaking now. But to this man who loved her, it was as if she had said nothing, save that one phrase about her husband, *"Of course he made all the difference."*

Carteret got up.

"I quite understand," he said coldly, "and I'm relieved to think that your link with these people was broken when your husband died"—he spoke in a hard, matter-of-fact way, in a voice which was new to Lilla. Though, stop—he had once spoken to her in that voice, when she was hesitating on the step of the railway carriage, the night of the Zeppelin raid. But what was this he was saying?

"I'm going away, to-night, to Holland. I shan't be back before Friday or Saturday. You're going down to Appledean on Saturday, I think?"

She said "Yes," in a low, startled voice. Going away? It made her feel as if the end of the world, her now happy, peaceful world, had come.

Long ago it had been settled with Mabel that she should go to Appledean that coming week-end, and though neither she nor Carteret had said much about it, it had been understood that they would travel down together—not in the car, but by train. And perhaps? —nay, certainly,—return together, too, on the Sunday night. But now all these plans had, it seemed, come to naught.

Lilla looked at her friend with wide-open, troubled eyes. It seemed to her that they had suddenly become strangers again.

She made a great effort to command herself—to call to her aid all those attributes of pride, of reticence, of dignity which so often stand a woman in good stead. "Then you're off to-night?" she said gently.

And he answered, gloomily, "Yes—but not till ten o'clock. It was only settled an hour ago. So I thought I'd come and suggest that we should go out and have a little dinner somewhere near here."

She looked at him doubtfully. "Hadn't you better go back and pack? You haven't very long." But she did not dream that he would take her at her word.

He wheeled round. The idea that they were not alone possessed him; he seemed to visualise a man's form in the darkening room—that man of whom she had spoken, with such easy familiarity, as "Robert."

"Well, if you don't mind, perhaps it would be best for me to go back and pack," he said. Then, looking at her with angry, suffering eyes, he asked, "You're not offended with me for telling you about Mr. Temple?"

And she answered eagerly, "No, of course I'm not! I'm grateful. It would have given me a horrible shock to have seen it in a paper—I suppose it will be in the papers?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "Nothing can prevent that. And if they're decent people they'll all take it very much to heart."

"Indeed—indeed they will," she said in a low voice. Somehow she could not realise it. The association of "Number 19" with any kind of disgrace seemed impossible.

She walked with him downstairs, and then through the front door.

They stood out on the path together for a moment, and the ghost of Robert Singleton, the ghost Carteret to-night had so deliberately raised in the little room upstairs, seemed to vanish out here, in the open air.

He took her soft hand in his firm grasp, and held it for a long time. "I hate going away," he said at last, in a low voice. "But I'll write to you, and I'll wire you an address where perhaps you will have the goodness to write to me—just a line to tell me how you are. I think I shall be back on Saturday morning early, in time for us to travel down together. You won't be going till Saturday, will you?"

Lilla, a dreadful load suddenly lifted off her heart, answered, "No—not till Saturday in any case. And I would wait till the afternoon—if it was more convenient for you."

She thought she heard, very low, the words, "My angel!" Then he dropped her hand, and went quickly away from her down the path, and through the little iron gate.

She stayed out there in the darkness for a long time. Though she knew positively that it had not been so, she felt, looking back, as if Carteret had taken her in his arms, and held her to him, closely, for a long, blissful moment. . . .

Then she went back into the house, and up to her bedroom. There she knelt down and prayed that Carteret might have a safe journey. She felt afraid—tremblingly afraid—of her unreasoning feeling of happiness. The sea was now full of awful, lurking dangers, and to-night, she could not help dwelling on what Carteret had told her—the Arab soothsayer's prophecy that he would meet his death by water.

CHAPTER VIII

CARTERET left London on a Tuesday night, and the Thursday that followed that Tuesday was one of the most anxious, disturbed and uncomfortable days Lilla had ever spent.

All Wednesday she was happy—happy as she had never been, and that though she was ashamed of feeling so blissfully content with life at a moment when misfortune, and disgrace which was far worse than misfortune, were hanging over the people whose name she still bore.

But Thursday began badly. She had confidently expected a letter or a telegram from Carteret, and no letter, or telegram, had come. And then, when she had got up, after a few hours of restless sleep, while she was standing at the window wondering when the postman would pass by again, she saw Philip Lark-Wright's lithe, still graceful figure at her gate. A moment later he was telling her that he had been deputed by Louisa to convey to her the dreadful news of Temple's arrest. The arrest had taken place that morning, and the fact would be recorded, so they had learnt, in all the evening papers.

Philip was surprised at the quietude with which "Mrs. Robert" took the awful tidings. He felt a pang of envy. Dear, gentle little Lilla! She was fortunate indeed to be out of it all.

"For the first time," he said soberly, "it makes me glad that poor Robert was killed. What a fearful thing this would have been for him! I can think of no man who would have felt it more keenly; he was the soul of—of rectitude, of honour."

Lilla flushed deeply. The words hurt her. "Such a thing could never have happened with Robert alive!" she exclaimed passionately.

Philip looked at her meditatively, and tugged at his long, golden moustache.

Lilla looked very pretty to-day, almost as pretty as in the long-ago days, ten years ago last spring, when Robert used to bring her to the studio to sit for that portrait which Philip resentfully supposed to be now hanging in one of the bedrooms of Number 19.

She was engaged in making him a cup of tea, for she had discovered that he had had no lunch; and he, Philip, looking at her quiet, graceful movements, wondered if he could persuade her to come and sit to him again. There was far more character in her delicate, high-bred little face than there had been when he had done that successful pastel. Lilla would now make a very interesting, distinguished study.

"Of course it would have happened," he said at last. "Robert knew really very little about business, and in any case he would have been at the Front at the time James did this—this idiotic thing. Even *I* feel the horrible disgrace, though I, thank goodness, am not a Singleton!"

He did not see that Lilla winced at that.

"As for Louisa—well, Louisa and her mother feel it far more than Jenny does. Jenny is simply angry—furious that any one has dared to say a word against James—enraged that the stupid, aimless, frivolous life she leads should be upset. Thanks to this business, they had a lot more money to spend than usual, and James had just given her a string of pearls. She hasn't the mind to understand the horror of it all, the kind of black shame of it!"

Among Louisa's several war economies was the substitution of a cheap and nasty tea for the "Lord Grey's Mixture" for which she had inherited a taste from her parents. So now Philip drank Lilla's good tea with particular enjoyment.

Then he got up and began walking up and down the little room. He had always been very fond of his sister-in-law, and he was aware that there had been one moment when Louisa, who was a jealous woman, had not quite approved his very innocent affection for Lilla.

"I wish I could do something," Lilla said slowly, "but I suppose they would really rather not see me?"

He stopped short. "Mrs. Singleton won't see any one—in fact Louisa feels very worried about her mother. I've always hated the old woman,—neither you nor I had any reason to like her, Lilla,—but, upon my word, I did feel sorry for her this morning! No one, not even Louisa, was willing to bell the cat, so we sent for that old lawyer of hers—she thinks a great deal of him, as you know, and he thinks a great deal of her. But even he was astonished at the way she took it. She simply turned into stone. I wonder, and I know he wondered too, why she didn't die there and then, right out! Her heart can't be as bad as we've always been told it is, or this would surely have killed her. You see, honesty, and a kind of business sense of honour, were her only virtues——"

Lilla gave a little cry of protest. "But no one can blame *her,"* she breathed.

"No, of course not! But she's always regarded herself as the head of the firm, since her husband died, and I think she *does* blame herself. You see, in the old days Temple used to come, about once a month, and give her an account of all that was being done, but it was dropped—I mean this monthly visit—after Robert's death. He never began it again—naturally! Even if he had, I don't believe she would have found out anything—though he was fool enough to keep a careful record of all he did in his letter-book."

"What will be done to him?" asked Lilla.

"They say he'll get the heaviest sentence ever inflicted for that particular offence—for trading with the enemy, I mean. And what makes me really anxious, Lilla,"—it was the greatest comfort to him to be able to pour all this out to one who, while being still one of themselves, was yet outside it all—"what makes me really anxious," he lowered his voice, "is as to how it will affect Mrs. Singleton's fortune. The whole of the money is in the firm—do you realise that, Lilla? It was never turned into a limited liability company, you know!"

She looked at him, dismayed—vicariously dismayed, for of course it did not affect her small settlement. Besides, if she ever married again, she lost that.

"Louisa's father left the whole of his big interest in the business to his widow—that's why we've all been always dependent on her. I wonder that Robert never told you that."

"Oh, but I think that I was told it, at the time of my marriage——" Lilla looked rather confused, and Philip nodded. He remembered.

"But when all's said and done, she's a wonderful old woman—is Louisa's mother! Within a quarter of an hour of her having first heard of the affair, after she had got over that first kind of stony shock, she at once gave old Thingamajig instructions for a new will—would you have thought it of her? Of course, none of us know what is to be in the new will, but we can all make a pretty shrewd guess that Temple isn't!"

He got up, reluctantly.

"Well, I'm afraid I must be off now. Louisa will be counting the minutes till I'm back—you know what she's like? She figured out exactly how long it would take me to get here, by Baker Street to Victoria, and then by tram, and she allowed half an hour for me to tell you the bad news——" he smiled, a rather odd, whimsical smile. "Thanks for the tea. It was delicious! I feel quite bucked up now—ready for Number 19 again. They're rather trying folk to be with when they're suffering under this kind of affliction." The painter had none of Lilla's loyalty to the Singleton clan.

Lilla had a very kindly feeling for poor Philip. "I was sorry to hear how much you have suffered by the war," she said, "I mean in the way of getting commissions. I suppose no one wants to have their portraits painted now?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "If only this war had happened ten years ago, it might have given me the chance to do some good work; but I've done too many pot-boilers to start on anything better now."

"Don't say that!" she exclaimed. "It's never too late to begin again! You must have a try, Philip."

"Well, perhaps I will. I told myself as I came along in the Underground to-day that I would try and do a picture. It's a queer thing, Lilla, but this destruction of the—well, what shall we call it?—the fetish of Singleton respectability, moral worthiness, and so forth, has done me quite a lot of good. Though I oughtn't to be the one to say it, neither the Larks nor the Wrights, humble Bohemian folk though they be, would ever have been caught trading with the enemy. Quite apart from morality, what a fool James has been! After all, there was no very great temptation that any one could see—of course he made a good whack of extra money for himself, as well as for Mrs. Singleton, but still, he was doing excellent business with our own Government. Everything in which the firm dealt is used, you know, in making shells, so of course, in a sense, James has been killing his own countrymen all these months—not a very pretty thought, Lilla, is it?"

"Will his trial last a long time?" asked Lilla uncomfortably.

"Oh, yes, quite a long time, I should think. It's a very big thing, and you may be sure the lawyers will make it bigger if they can. I fancy the Treasury are still getting up the case. A good deal of the evidence will have to come from Holland. Some Dutchmen are going to be brought over, I believe."

Though she came down to her front door, she did not walk with him to the little gate; there was only one person with whom she ever wished to walk to that gate, now.

He turned and waved his hand. "I'll give them your love," he called out, "and say how sorry you are! Perhaps you wouldn't mind writing a line to Louisa? I think it would comfort her. She's always been fond of you, Lilla."

"Of course I will—and to poor Jenny, too."

She went on standing at the door, for she had heard the postman coming along the Embankment. She took a letter from him, but alas! it was not the letter she was longing for; instead, it was a letter from Cecil Sturges, and her heart turned sick with disappointment.

Slowly she walked up the steep little staircase again, and opened the letter. It was to tell her that Cecil had decided to take a week's further holiday; and he asked her, with an undercurrent of doubt and pain, whether she had yet made up her mind.

"I am just the same, but I feel that you have changed."

A rather pathetic sentence, and one which, she felt, made the writing of her answer easier. She sat down and told him that yes, she had changed. And very humbly, in simple, moving language, she asked him to forgive her for the pain she was causing him, and for what she feared must seem to him unreasonable caprice.

Then she told herself that she must write, not only to Louisa, but to Jenny,—and as the letter to Jenny was the harder of the two, she began with that one. But perhaps because she was tired and excited, the right words would not come. She started the letter—the letter which need only be a kindly, affectionate note of condolence—half a dozen times.

And then, as she tried to find expressions which should be at once sympathetic and tactful, there was borne in upon her, really for the first time, a perception of what a dreadful, disgraceful thing this was which her brother-in-law had done!

She laid down her pen, and tried to visualise James Temple in prison. The thought seemed incredible, grotesque. Jenny's husband had always appeared to Lilla as a massive human pillar of justified self-righteousness, and of respectability. She was well aware that he had disapproved of Robert's marriage, and that he had always disliked her. He was the only one of the circle who had ever been, in an active sense, rude and discourteous to her.

One little incident came back to her from out of the now dead past.. It had taken place years ago, but Lilla had remembered it all through the years, because it was one of the very few times when her husband had failed her. Temple had said something sneering and disagreeable concerning the High Church vicar of a church in their neighbourhood, and she, Lilla, who had found vague comfort in the clergyman's ministrations, had burst out, eagerly, in his defence. At once James had turned on her roughly, saying something which she regarded, rightly, as being very insulting—something about women always running after priests. And Robert, instead of taking her part, had apparently tacitly agreed with James; at any rate, he had not defended her.

The whole thing had been over in a few moments, for Lilla, as always, had submitted, fallen away into silence. But it had made a difference. Neither she nor James, after that, had gone back to the suave, correct, if cold, terms of family affection; and it was significant that, whereas every one else had written or spoken to her after the news of Robert's death had been confirmed, James had not said even a word of condolence.

At the time she had been hardly conscious of the omission, but she remembered it now, as she sat trying to phrase a form of words which should convey how sorry she was for this great trouble which had come on him and on his wife. She felt a pang as she thought of their children. Poor James! Surely in such a case as this the fact that a man has children must greatly increase his agony and remorse?

The letter to Louisa was far more easy to write. She was on really kindly and affectionate terms with Louisa; and she even sent a message of dutiful sympathy to Mrs. Singleton.

That same evening Joy Ancret exclaimed carelessly: "Dare Carteret—you'll remember him, Lilla, for he drove you home from Victory House?—Well, Dare Carteret is in Holland! A friend of ours ran across him there yesterday. As usual, he was very mysterious—but of course every one knows that The Hague is a hotbed of spies."

The next day, Friday, was an empty day—empty, and yet filled with a growing uneasiness. It was strange indeed that Carteret, who hardly ever let a day go by without writing to her, even when they were to meet the same evening, should now leave her without a word.

She began to wonder, with a horrible sensation of humiliation and pain, whether Carteret meant in very

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truth to slacken in his friendship. He had spoken oddly, in a way that was most unlike himself, of the James Temple affair. She remembered, with growing dismay, the questions he had asked her as to her present association with the Singletons. He had called them "those people." And when she, perhaps with a foolish quixotry, had closely identified herself with them, he had certainly looked at her with anger, and a kind of—was it indignation?—in his eyes. It was as if a cold blast had come between them. . . .

And yet, at the end of that awkward, painful conversation, when she had gone with him to the gate all had seemed suddenly to come right between them—or had everything which had happened out on her little front path been imagination on her part? The thought, the suspicion, was unendurable. But she could not doubt that he had asked her to be "good enough" to write to him. He had even said he would wire. And now three days had gone by without a word from him, and he had not even let her know if he was to be back on Saturday!

That Friday night Joy Ancret looked at Lilla with concern. "You don't seem at all well!" she exclaimed. "I'm glad you're going away to-morrow. Don't hurry back. I shall be quite able to manage, not only on Sunday, but on Monday and on Tuesday too, if you feel you'd better stay away till then."

Saturday morning brought no letter, but Lilla all the same stayed on in London all through the morning, and most of the afternoon. She would have liked to remain at home and hide herself. For the first time in her life she felt ashamed and humiliated, as well as anxious and unhappy.

But she could not make up her mind to disappoint Mabel,—Mabel, who had written with such eager pleasure of her coming,—and so she went down to Appledean by a late train.

The first words Mrs. Gasparin said to her visitor were: "Why, Lilla? What's the matter, darling? You look tired out! I'm sorry now that I've asked Dare Carteret over to dinner. He only arrived at Baycombe this afternoon, and his mother, who didn't expect him, has got a tiresome old priest staying there. He telephoned over, and I thought—it may be only my fancy—that he rather *wanted* to be asked. You do like him, don't you?"

Lilla hesitated a moment, and then answered, slowly, "Oh, yes—I do like him. He has been very kind to me."

CHAPTER IX

THE next morning Lilla awoke in the pretty room which was always regarded as hers at Appledean. The windows overlooked part of the arboretum, and just now the house was gay within and without with brilliantly-tinted autumn flowers.

She had lain long awake last night, hardly knowing what it was that ailed her, after the most miserable evening she had ever spent.

Carteret, while evidently making a great effort to appear as usual before his hostess, had been abrupt, cold, and distant in his manner, utterly unlike the man whom she, Lilla, had come to know with so intimate and confiding a knowledge. When she had given him her hand, he had dropped it as though her touch burnt him.

They had not had a moment alone together, for of course there was no reason why Mabel Gasparin should leave them. Also the evening had been very short; at ten, Carteret had got up and said he must go home, as he had a report to write; and Mabel had offered to let him out of a gate in the park which, giving on to the downs, shortened the way to Baycombe.

Neither of them had seemed to expect Lilla to come too, and so, feeling sore, bewildered, and unutterably wretched, she had gone upstairs, hoping that her cousin would not follow her.

A quarter of an hour later, Mabel, knocking at

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the door, had walked in to find Lilla crying, and Lilla had hurt Mabel, really hurt her, for the first time in her life, for she had refused to say what was making her unhappy.

For hours she had tossed about restlessly, telling herself that after all it was natural Dare Carteret should look as he had looked, and behave as he had behaved, to-night. However much she, Lilla, had over-estimated his liking, his—his regard for her, he must yet know quite well that he had not kept his word in the matter of writing. But had she been in his place, she surely would have said quite honestly that this Singleton affair had altered his feeling for her, or, what she suspected to be the real truth, that his official position made it difficult for him to be on terms of intimate friendship with a member of the Singleton family. . . .

"Would you like me to bring up your letters, ma'am?" Mabel's maid was standing by her bedside with a cup of tea.

"I don't think there can be any letters for me to-day."

"Oh, yes, ma'am, there's one, I know—a big letter. I'll go downstairs and bring it up."

It was a ready-addressed envelope which Lilla had left behind her yesterday.

She tore open the envelope, and there dropped out two letters addressed in an already familiar handwriting, and two telegrams. The letters both bore a strip of white paper pasted across the top on which were the printed words, "Opened by the Censor." The telegrams also had been opened, for each bore the words, "Censored. Delayed in transmission."

Then he had written? He had telegraphed? And she, foolish, ungrateful, distrustful Lilla, had built up a whole superstructure of pain, of humiliation, of self-reproach, on a silence which had been no silence.

The colour rushed into her pale face. What must he think of her—his friend?

She took out the two letters, and glanced over them. They were queer, whimsical, as had so often been his little daily notes, but with a new and more tender touch than he had ever allowed himself before.

"For the first time in my life I felt afraid when on the water. I've been to Holland six times since the war began, and I've never given mines or submarines a thought. But now that I know you I don't want to die—unless you die at the same time. That's selfish, isn't it? But then I know that you've enough goodness to frank any poor sinner, as well as yourself, straight into heaven!"

As for the telegrams, one simply gave an address. The other was long and detailed; its purport—would she have the great kindness to meet him at Sanchester on Saturday afternoon, he being compelled, for reasons which he would tell her later, to take a cross-country journey there from the port where he was to land that morning? If she would wait for him—his train might be a few minutes after hers—he would drive her out to Appledean.

That telegram had been despatched from some little town in Holland two days ago.

Lilla got up, and went downstairs. She felt too restless, too excited, at once too happy and too uneasy, to stay in bed for breakfast, as it had been arranged she should do. She longed, just as does a dear, generous-hearted child who knows it has been naughty, to "make it up."

There was nothing small or calculating in Lilla's nature. She felt that it was for her to make the first step,—to ask for Carteret's forgiveness.

One of the things about her life at FitzClarence Crescent which had made her suffer the most often had been the need for unending calculation, and the checking of eager impulses. Even with Robert she had never been quite sure how far she could be her natural self. He was apt to think her unreasonable, and dangerously unconventional, for he himself had inherited a solid, unimaginative, cautious nature from his father.

Lilla was still not at all accustomed to the telephone, but she made up her mind this morning that she would telephone to Dare Carteret. It would be so much easier to speak to him than to write!

So she sought out the old butler, and asked him to get her through to Mrs. Carteret's house. "Will you say that Mrs. Singleton wants to speak to Mr. Carteret?" she said.

And when, in a few moments, he turned round and, wagging his old head, informed her that Mr. Carteret had gone out early that morning, and was not yet back, she felt a pang of almost intolerable disappointment. Then she told herself that, after all, she had deserved that this should happen!

"Please say that Mrs. Singleton would like to speak to Mr. Carteret as soon as he comes in."

She heard the old man give the message, and then, without stopping to put on her hat, she went out into Mabel's rose garden, taking with her a book which Carteret had given her, but which she had not yet opened. It was a book about France—the France she had always loved, and known with so familiar a knowledge, in the days of her childhood. But up to now—Carteret had only given it her the day before he left London—she had shrunk from opening this book; everything that reminded her of him had hurt her, during these last few days.

But when she sat down in a garden chair, not far from the window of Mabel's boudoir, she did not open the book. Instead, she read, over and over again, the two letters which had arrived that morning.

As Carteret passed the church on Appledean Green, he saw that it was only ten o'clock—too early, he knew well, for a man to pay a morning call on a lady. And yet he felt he could not wait even a moment longer than he must. He had had plenty of time for thought, for self-rebuke, during his long walk that morning, for Carteret, strange to say, had been into Sanchester; he had driven in, but he had walked out.

Carteret had done something to-day which had greatly surprised himself—he had confided his trouble to another person, a person, too, whom up to that time he had not really known well, and whom he had not particularly liked.

Deep in his heart he had expected encouragement and reassurance, but neither had been yielded him, and he had left his confidante less happy than when he had

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first found her, for Carteret's confidante had been a woman.

And now, as he made his way up the long carriage drive of Appledean House, he told himself that he was doubtless rushing on to his own destruction—that Lilla would regard what he had come to say to her, would conceive the offer of marriage he was about to make to her, as almost an insult—so short and unconventional had been their acquaintance.

He walked on, with long, even strides, sorely tempted now and again to turn on his heel and go back to Baycombe. He had said nothing to his mother, though he knew full well that there he would find not only sympathy, but the quick, intuitive understanding which he had missed so much when he had been pouring out his heart to another woman that morning.

But though he toyed with the idea of turning round and going back to his mother's house, he knew very well that he must now go forward and put his fortune to the touch. Also, he felt that he would do anything, run any risk, simply to see Lilla again and alone. Mrs. Gasparin's presence in her own house last night had been to him an intolerable intrusion.

As is generally the case when a man goes to a foreign town to do a special piece of business, Carteret had spent many lonely hours at The Hague, and during those hours his longing for Lilla had eaten into his very soul. He had written many letters, only to tear them up, and he had actually forgotten all about the Censorship! Lilla, and Lilla alone, had the power of making him forget the war. Yet he had had a queer, superstitious fear lest he and she might never meet again, that he might be drowned on his return voyage, and so die before telling her how he loved her.

As they had stood by her gate in the darkness on the night of his leaving London, he had felt an overwhelming impulse to take her in his arms, and hold her closely to him—just once—even if never again. He had thought (and God knew that he was not a man apt to think such things) that they two had suddenly come nearer to one another—and that, understanding, she would be kind. But he had been afraid. He had not dared to risk the certain measure of happiness he now possessed, for a far more uncertain bliss, and so he had let his chance, his immortal moment, go by.

And then, as the three days wore away, and he heard nothing from her, Carteret had grown very sore and angry. The fact that they had become such close friends should surely have made her feel that she was cruel not to write to him—he who had so often written to her?

Still, when he had sent her the second telegram, he had felt quite sure that she would do what he asked, and, not finding her at Sanchester, he had begun to imagine all sorts of things—that she was ill, or that she had had an accident. Still in that state of suspense, and mingled wrath and anxiety, he had reached home, to telephone within ten minutes to Appledean House, only to learn that Lilla was expected there that evening.

He was bitterly sorry now that he, who had never done such a thing before, had fished, deliberately, for an invitation to dinner. At once, on arriving at Appledean, he had seen that something had changed Lilla, offended her, and with all the power that was in him he had willed that Mrs. Gasparin should leave them, even for a minute, alone together. But she had sat on and on, and when, at last, he had got up, it was she who had accompanied him to the gate which led on to the open down. Lilla had not even offered to come too.

Carteret walked up to the front door, and rang the bell. Then he waited, for what seemed to his tired, excited mind a very, very long time. But at last the door opened.

"Is Mrs. Singleton in?" he asked abruptly.

"Well, sir, I'm not sure if she's indoors, or somewhere out in the garden. Will you come into Mrs. Gasparin's boudoir, while I find out, sir? Mrs. Gasparin, she's gone into Sanchester this morning."

As if he didn't know that!

While walking through the hall, full of George's sporting trophies, and then down the wide corridor, he was almost minded to turn on his heel, and leave the house. But he knew that he could not do that now. Whatever the outcome of their meeting, he would see her, at any rate—and how much he longed to see her, simply to see her and be with her, amazed himself.

The butler was taking him down further than he had ever gone before in the big house; past the dining-room, past the drawing-room where he had spent so wretched an hour last night, to the very end of the corridor. There, to the right, he was shown into a small, pretty sitting-room.

"If you'll wait here, sir, I'll go and try and find Mrs. Singleton."

He looked round him, and somehow the atmosphere of this room soothed his fevered mind. There were photographs of George's two little sons, and over the mantelpiece a rather absurd crayon drawing of George himself, as a fat boy of three, dressed in a kilt, and hugging a big dog to his breast.

It was the room of a busy and, in normal times, happy wife and mother, and Dare Carteret, with a sudden, sore feeling, wondered why he had never been asked in here before. And then he told himself, with the harsh truthfulness which was characteristic of him, that Mabel Gasparin's associations with him were, after all, sad, painful, some would say shameful, associations.

He had never thought of it in that way before, but now he realised that it was very good of Mrs. Gasparin to have allowed her husband to offer Baycombe Cottage to his mother. He, Carteret, must ever remind her of a part of her life which she must surely long to forget—the time when she had gone out, full no doubt of impulsive kindness, to a man who had used her very ill when she was a girl, a married man with whom she had nearly—bolted.

That man, her old love, had been dying miserably, out in the desert, and she, Mabel, her own mistress, and no longer so very young, had gone out to Egypt. And there, by great good fortune, she had met George Gasparin, for they two, Gasparin and Carteret, had been together, attending to the dying man, when Mabel had arrived.

He wondered how much Lilla, pure, stainless little

Lilla, knew of all that part of Mabel's life—Lilla, who always spoke with such deep, warm affection of her cousin. It was strange that women so utterly different should be such dear, such intimate friends. And yet—and yet, if they were really intimate, then surely Lilla must know more of life, and of what the passion of love may mean to men and to women, than she seemed to know?

As he walked restlessly about the pretty room, Carteret tried to reason himself to a calmer and wiser state of mind. If only he and Lilla could go back to their old happy relations of a few days ago! Perhaps his letters had frightened her, struck her as a thought too familiar, as presuming on what was after all a very short acquaintance.

And then he heard a slight sound, and, looking round, he saw the long French window being pushed open from outside,—and Lilla walked in from the garden.

She had her back to the light, and he was far too agitated himself to see how moved, and how troubled, she looked.

"I only got your two letters from Holland this morning," she said falteringly. "The telegrams too. So you see I couldn't write. I do hope my not being at Sanchester didn't put you to any delay or inconvenience. I do ask you to forgive me——"

And then, as she looked up into his ravaged face, her heart was filled with a delicious confusion of feelings—of pity, of concern, and of deep, unreasoning joy, for he looked as if he had minded as much—almost as much—as she had!

He took both her hands, and drew her, unresisting, further into the room.

"I've come to tell you," he said hoarsely, "that I love you. That I can't go on as we've been going on, unless—unless I can hope that some day you will become my wife. I don't mind how long I wait—but if you tell me that I may not hope, then I must manage to go away."

He spoke in a quick, dry, low voice, but he was not looking at her as he spoke—he was staring over her head.

And then she made an inarticulate little sound, and, looking down, he saw in her eyes a softness, a kindness, which made him drop her hands quickly, and seize her hungrily, and draw her to him. She was already in his arms when he heard her whisper, "You must stay—not go away."

CHAPTER X

WHILE most of the respectable people of Sanchester were still in the cathedral, for it was Sunday morning, Mrs. Gasparin walked through into the coffee-room of the Red Lion Hotel.

The Red Lion was a large, old-fashioned coaching inn, which, in the life of the city in days gone by, had played a great part, especially at Election times. Just now it was filled with soldiers and officers, for Sanchester was surrounded by great camps. But at a quarter to twelve on Sunday morning the place was almost empty.

The other ladies who worked at the Red Cross Hospital had their luncheon in the hospital, or with friends in the Close, but Mrs. Gasparin, who generally preferred her own company to that of anybody else, always took a rather early hour off, and went and had a simple meal at the Red Lion. And during a part of that hour she often wrote up the diary-letter which she sent to her husband three times a week.

To-day she was so anxious to pass on to George all that was in her heart, that the thought of food was distasteful.

She went into the bar, and Mrs. Burnaby, the landlady of the Red Lion, turned round and smiled. Mrs. Gasparin, if not as popular in Sanchester as was George Gasparin, was yet very well liked.

"Yes, ma'am? Is there anything I can do for you, ma'am——"

"I'd be glad of a piece of cake and a glass of milk in about—well, say, forty minutes, Mrs. Burnaby! I don't want it before then. I'm going into the coffee-room to write—I see it's empty now."

"Wouldn't you like to go into our parlour, ma'am? You'd find it more comfortable there."

"Thanks very much. Perhaps I should—just to write my letter."

She passed through the comfortable wainscoted bar into a gaudily furnished little room which overlooked the old walled garden of the inn, and before settling herself down with her pad and fountain pen, she threw a kindly glance at a new photograph on the table.

It was a photograph of young Tom Burnaby. She knew his honest face very well, for as a small fat lad he used to run forward and take her ponies when she drove into Sanchester early in her married life. She had not thought then that the little boy to whom she had so often given a shilling for himself, would one day receive his commission as second lieutenant in her husband's regiment. But there was his photograph in his new uniform to prove it; and what was more—and Mrs. Gasparin had gladdened his mother's heart by telling her so last week—Tom Burnaby was shaping very well, according to the colonel.

She took what she wanted out of her bag, and sitting down by the window glanced over what she had already written there the day before. It went down to half-way on the page, and the last words were: "I must leave off now,—for Lilla has just arrived. She is staying till Monday."

A funny little smile came over Mrs. Gasparin's face, and fixing her blotting pad firmly on her knees, she wrote down the words:

"The Red Lion,
"Sanchester.

"In Mrs. Burnaby's parlour. With young Tom's photograph as a full-fledged second lieutenant staring at me on my right."

And then:

"The most amazing, incredible, wonderful thing has happened, George, since I wrote yesterday. Lilla and Dare Carteret! Would you ever have imagined either of them capable of being madly in love? Well, I now ask you to think of them both as madly in love with one another!

"But I had better begin at the beginning.

"I forget if I told you—but I think I *did* tell you—that they met on the night of the big Zeppelin raid over London. They happened to be in the same train, and the people had to get out of the train because a Zeppelin came over it just as the train was going through Dorking. I can't quite make out what happened, for Lilla said very little about it when she wrote, but evidently she made a very deep impression, for Dare (I call him Dare now, I never liked him well enough to do so before!)—Dare declares that he fell in love with her at first sight—before he knew anything about her. He took her for a girl, travelling by herself for the first time!

"As I told you at the time, from quite early that next morning the most ridiculous rumours were about in Appledean—London half destroyed, etc., etc. As to the telephone, I couldn't get through even to Sanchester! So on my way to the hospital I stopped at Mrs. Carteret's house to hear if she had any news. And while I was there Dare telephoned to his mother, and I asked her—I can't think what made me do it, it seemed such an off-chance—whether he could give me any news of Lilla. We were both rather surprised when he said 'Yes,' that he had met her, and that they had had some talk together.

"That will be a month ago next Wednesday, yet since then—it seems incredible—they seem to have met *every day*. But Lilla, though, as you know, she writes to me quite often, said nothing at all about it—sly little thing!

"When she came down last evening, I could see something was up,—though of course you'll put that down to my vivid imagination. Just before dinner, as I was writing a line to the boys, she suddenly came up and kissed me. You know what a dear, loving little thing she is,—still I was rather surprised.

"I'd asked Dare Carteret over to dinner. He hadn't been down to see his mother, his 'Mum' as he calls her, for quite a long time, and I wanted to see him in order to try and get a little War Office news out of him. But when he did come I felt quite sorry I'd asked him! Lilla hardly spoke at all, and he didn't say much. But I did notice that he looked at her a good deal. He asked her something about her work; but, so far as Lilla could be such a thing, she was rather snubby.

"But one thing might have opened my eyes——"

And then Mabel Gasparin scratched out the words she had just written. No, she wouldn't put that down, not even to George! But she had been struck by the great care with which her cousin had dressed for the very simple little dinner. Although Lilla was evidently tired and run down, she, Mabel, had seldom seen her look as attractive as she had looked last evening.

She wrote on:

"I wasn't surprised that he got up to go quite early, saying he had a report to write. And then he asked Lilla whether she was going back to town on Sunday night. But she said 'no,' that she had promised me to stay till Monday. I did think him rather put out at that, and I thought it odd that he should care, one way or the other. And then perhaps—well, just a little glimmer came to me that perchance he *did* like Lilla. But, as you know, George, most men who come across her do like her, so *that* didn't impress me much.

"I walked with him to the north gate, and when we got there he took hold of my hand and squeezed it so hard that it hurt! Then he said, 'Can I drive you into Sanchester to-morrow morning? I've something I want to ask you.' Of course I said 'Yes.' But I warned him that I went through Baycombe very early, at a quarter past seven, on Sunday mornings. He said that would be all right.

"When I got indoors again, I found that Lilla had already gone upstairs, and when I went into her bedroom she was crying, poor little dear. Even then I never guessed what was the matter. She kept saying it was nothing,—that she was tired,—that the night work was trying her. But I couldn't help seeing that she didn't want to tell me the real reason.

"Well, the next morning, sure enough, he was there, waiting for me in the road by his mother's house. He *would* drive,—and he drove like the devil! I was frightened out of my wits—but not for long, for he got me here, to Sanchester, in about five minutes! Then he asked me if I'd walk round the Close with him; and as soon as he got me there—well, George, it all came out—like the bursting of a dam!

"Of course I can't put it in his own really eloquent words. But the gist of it all was that he *adored* Lilla with a kind of adoration quite different from the kind of love humbler mortals feel! That life without her would be hell—not that he would go to the devil, he would still care far too much for her, even if he never saw her again, for that! He *had* once gone to the devil over a woman, but that had been years ago. *Now,* he knew what true love was. But that if Lilla had turned against him, as he was beginning to think she had done, for she hadn't written to him during the three days he had been away,—and after the peculiar manner in which she had behaved last night,—then he must manage to get sent abroad, to India or to Mesopotamia! He couldn't go on living in London if she was in London too, unless he could see her, unless she went on being kind to him! He ventured to ask me what I thought—if I could give him any hope, and so on, and so on——

"It's a shame to tell you all this—isn't it? You can imagine how upset I felt—how upset, and also how sorry for the poor fellow! I really felt as if I had a madman on my hands. I've never known any one have it as badly as that! Still, even if you'd been at my elbow, I don't think I could have been more—well, sensible and prudent than I was. I'm afraid he thought me stupid and rather unsympathetic, but of course I wanted to let him down gently.

"It was the queerest talk! I reminded him that he'd only known her about three weeks, and I told him that Lilla had always been a very quiet, reserved kind of little creature. Then he exclaimed that if she would go on seeing him every day (only that!), he wouldn't mind how long he waited. He also insisted on telling me all about his money matters, so that I might see he was in a position to marry, and that if he did marry Lilla, and she became a widow, she would be even better off than she was now! He's just had the lease of that queer little house in Westminster offered to him, but he said that, if Lilla had turned against him, then he must leave London, for he wouldn't be fit to go on working there!

"To soothe him down a little, I told him that she was anything but well off, and how *disgracefully* the Singletons had behaved about it. But of course he didn't give that a thought—in fact it evidently pleased him to know they had behaved badly.

"Then, all at once, he began to ask me about Robert Singleton, and I could see that the mere thought of poor Robert was driving him wild with a queer kind of backward jealousy. *There I* was able to do some good. I think I did make him understand that he had no reason to fear *that* poor fellow's ghost!

"Well, the end of it was that I told him that in his place I shouldn't say anything *definite* to Lilla yet, for I felt sure it would upset her very much, as she probably hadn't the slightest idea that he liked her.

"And then—oh, George, I couldn't help laughing, and I can't help laughing now when I think of it—he muttered between his teeth, 'Like? *Like,* Mrs. Gasparin? Don't you understand that I *adore* her, and that I don't mind how long I wait, if only I may hope——'

"When I got into the hospital I felt quite shaken up, as if I'd been in a big storm. And then—well, only about an hour ago, I was told Mr. Carteret would like to speak to me on the telephone!

"I turned positively green with terror, but when I heard his voice, it was not at all loud, and yet it *rang* with triumph. He just said, 'It's all right. I'm taking her back to lunch with Mum. And she's going up to town with me to-night. She sends you her love, and I'm to say she'll be back by three o'clock this afternoon.'

"I knew that if I didn't say something silly I should begin to cry, so I just answered: 'I suppose you've already fixed the day?' and you can imagine what I felt when he called back, 'Yes, we've fixed the day. A fortnight from yesterday. That'll give ample time to get the necessary dispensations, and so on.' I don't know what he meant by that, but I suppose it's something connected with the Pope, for of course Lilla is a Protestant, and he's a Catholic—though it isn't a thing one is very apt to remember about him!

"Dear Mrs. Carteret! I wonder how *she* will feel? But she's such a wonderful mother, such a wonderful woman, that anything that makes *him* happy will make her happy too. Still, when I think of her—well, George, I do feel like crying when I think of *her*."

She wrote on, telling her husband one or two items of local gossip, of local interest; George cared for every stone, for every twig, for every blade of grass, at Appledean.

And then she ended up, as she always did end up her letters to him,

"Your devoted wife,
"MABEL."

But this time she added a postscript:

"No one seems to think of poor Cecil Sturges. But all this is just a little hard on him, isn't it?"

CHAPTER XI

JUST at the moment when Mrs. Gasparin was beginning her letter in the parlour of the Red Lion, Carteret and Lilla were passing through the gate, set in the Appledean Park palings, which opened out on to the down.

The path which led to Baycombe was one of those old immemorial tracks across the Sussex downs which seem to begin and to end nowhere. Yet there must have been a time when it had been much used by man and beast, for it was sunk deep in the white chalk on the side of the steep ridge hiding the valley from the great military camps which now covered the downs far-flung from the Surrey hills to the sea.

Just below the lonely path lay the noble belt of the Appledean woods. At one point the belt jutted upwards, and absorbed, for perhaps as much as a quarter of a mile, the white way on which Carteret and Lilla were now walking.

He took her hand and kept it, clasped closely in his; and so they went on, side by side, saying very little, each as it were overwhelmed with that wonderful, strange sense of nearness which only lovers know.

But when they were well within the belt of lonely wood, where the path narrowed to a tiny, leaf-strewn track amid the bracken, Carteret suddenly stopped.

Here they were alone,—alone as they had never been out of doors,—and yet here, in this green, leafy solitude, he almost feared to take her in his arms, for, with certain natures, ardent and yet restrained, reverence is an integral part, not only of worship, but of love.

Every cloudy element of Carteret's nature seemed in this last hour to have become fused, refined, in the clear flame of passion. He shrank from taking—nay, he disdained to take—aught that was not given willingly.

In that cheerful, mundane-looking room at Appledean, where everything spoke to him of another woman's ownership, he had held, 'tis true, his dear love in his arms. But now he was tormented by the thought that perchance it was pity that had brought her there. He was too much a man to accept pity as akin to love.

And then, as he looked down at her, gripping her hand ever more and more tightly, perhaps his eyes—his blazing, supplicating eyes—created in Lilla something which had been strangely wanting in her, of which she had never felt the need, for suddenly he felt her coming to him in a wholly voluntary, instinctive gesture of surrender.

And in that moment of ecstasy the retrospective jealousy with which he had been so tortured—that dark, terrible passion with which no reasoning can do away—left Carteret for ever. He knew that he alone had awakened in Lilla that element, at once ardent and spiritual, passionate yet pure, which in a woman is called love.

And when, at last, they passed out of the wood, out on to the sunny down again, she felt as if it had indeed been there, in the green depth and shade, that she had first partaken of, and been sanctified by, the sacrament of love. . . .

Soon, all too soon for Carteret's content, they came to the end of the high grassy ridge. Below them lay the hamlet of Baycombe, and, embowered in high trees, rose the group of the grey stone monastery buildings.

It was the first time that Lilla had seen the monastery from the downs since the old ruins had been restored to their primitive condition, and it changed the landscape, causing Baycombe Cottage, of which she had always known the outside as seen from the Sanchester road, to look like a toy house nestling up close to the chapel of the monastery.

In a rather strained voice—it was the first time he had spoken to her since they had come out of the wood—Carteret exclaimed, "My mother is at Mass. The local Catholics go earlier, to a shorter service. Would you mind our going into the chapel for a moment? She will be coming out very soon. We might stand at the back, and wait there for her."

Though she answered "Yes" at once, a wave of fear came over Lilla. She knew that Carteret's mother played a great part in Carteret's life, so much had he unconsciously revealed to her. And her heart, which had never known jealousy, much as she had suffered from Mrs. Singleton, was now filled with that painful, unreasoning anguish which is so often the shadow of love. The sensation was so acute, so physically painful, that she felt as if the sun had gone out, and the landscape about her become darkened.

What if Mrs. Carteret were dismayed, angered by her son's engagement? From something he had said, Lilla knew that her lover's mother was ignorant, if not of her actual existence, then certainly of the friendship which had bound those two so closely together since last he had been staying at Baycombe. Before he had met her, Lilla, he had come to see his mother almost always every week. Now he had missed three Sundays.

But as they walked down the steep path, she felt her painful unease become less, and when at one moment he turned and took her two hands in his strong grasp to help her down the slippery chalk way, she felt as if nothing could really matter, now that she belonged to him.

They passed through into the private grounds of the monastery, and turned into a walk, set between high yew hedges, which led to the public door of the chapel.

And then, as they made their way slowly through the green corridor, there fell on their ears the sound of chanting. The setting of the Mass which was being sung this Sunday was one which has always been in favour, perhaps because it is simple and tuneful, in the parish churches of provincial France. Lilla was familiar with the "Agnus Dei," which was just then rising and falling, full of plaintive melody, through the open windows of the little chapel.

"Are they French monks?" she whispered, surprised. And Carteret answered quickly, "Didn't you know that they were? All the young ones have gone off to the war, but the old ones remain, and it's a joy to the poor old things to have my mother here. She knows and loves France almost as much as they do, for she was brought up in a French convent. I sometimes tell her that in this war she feels more French than English!"

They were walking on the grassy side of the path so that their feet might make no sound, and suddenly Carteret took Lilla in his arms, and kissed her, passionately, again.

Mabel Gasparin, for all her love of love, would have been shocked at such a betrayal of deep human feeling within the shadow of the House of God, and especially under the walls of a monastery—of that which stands for supreme renunciation. But Lilla knew instinctively that to Carteret his love, however human, partook of the best, the highest, that was in him, and she felt comforted that there, close to his mother, he thus reasserted his worship of her.

He opened the door of the little chapel very quietly, and the sound of their entrance was drowned by the loud, clear singing of Latin pronounced in the French way.

They remained at the very back of the chapel, and soon he drew her behind a broad pillar, a survival of the old Norman ruin. So hidden, Lilla saw, without being seen, the chancel spread out before her.

In the stalls, on either side below the high altar, stood the monks, chanting, but there were many gaps among them, and the voices, now that she could hear them more clearly, were mostly old and quavering. As for the congregation, it only consisted of one person; and that a small, standing, feminine figure, which she knew must be Carteret's mother. And at the sight of that pathetic little figure, which leant forward heavily, uncomfortably, on two stout walking-sticks, Lilla felt a sudden sense of reassurance. She remembered that Carteret had once said to her, "My mother is the most unselfish human being I have ever known——" And there came over her a sudden, comfortable conviction, that Mrs. Carteret would feel glad, instead of sorry, that a great love had come into her son's life. She even said to herself, "I wonder if she is praying for him now?"

Mass was now nearly over, and the monks broke into a French hymn, also familiar to Lilla from the far-off days of her childhood spent in France. *"Sauvez—sauvez la France!"* was the refrain those old citizens of no earthly kingdom sang with eager, trembling voices. And then, when they had finished the hymn, the monks left their stalls and passed out, in solemn procession.

Waiting till she thought the chapel was empty, Mrs. Carteret moved very slowly into the centre of the nave, and, with the tap-tap of her two sticks echoing through the arches, she walked down towards the door.

Mrs. Carteret was small and plain, but in the pale face into which Lilla was now gazing so anxiously, and in the expression of the bright, dark eyes, there was a wonderful look of thoughtful serenity and resignation.

When his mother was quite close to the door, Carteret came out from behind the pillar where he and Lilla had been standing for the last ten minutes, and the infirm woman heard the voice which had ever been to her the dearest voice in the world, cry out, in low, shaken accents, "Mum? I've brought you the angel who has promised to become my wife!"

And then, instead of the look of astonishment, perhaps softened by conventional kindness, which was

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all that Lilla expected to see pass over the worn, sensitive face, she saw it light up in a glow of joy. And at once, steadying herself with the help of the stick she held in her left hand, Mrs. Carteret lifted up her right arm and put it round Lilla—they were almost exactly of a height—and whispered, "May God bless you, my dear child, for your kindness to my son."

A time soon came when these two women loved each other with the love which, among women at least, means the withholding of very little that is secret,—but Lilla never knew what deep, poignant relief, as well as joy, Carteret's words brought to his mother that Sunday morning. Those words ended what had been for Mrs. Carteret a time of painful and protracted anxiety.

She had been, indeed, and that over a long time, as anxious and as unhappy as her faith would allow her to be.

First had come the disquieting knowledge of her son's bitter disappointment as to his share in the war. Later, he had comforted her with the assurance that at last he realised that he was doing indispensable work—work as indispensable and as important as that being done by his comrades and friends in the trenches. But within the last three weeks, she had become conscious that a new element of unrest and of excitement had entered into his life, and her anxiety as to this secret thing grew almost unbearable as the days went by, and as on three successive Saturdays he made what she felt to be an unreal excuse for not coming to Baycombe.

Then yesterday, on Carteret's return from Holland, the mother had seen at once that there was something very wrong with her boy, something that was making her darling intolerably wretched, and, as is the way of men, depressed, and almost savagely ill-tempered. He had talked recklessly too—as if he meant shortly to apply for some difficult, extra dangerous, work in the East.

Life had taught Mrs. Carteret that nothing makes a man look and talk as her son had looked and talked yesterday, and even early this morning, excepting something—and often such a little thing!—connected with a woman. She would have welcomed almost any daughter-in-law that Sunday morning, but her heart sang its Nunc Dimittis as she gazed, God alone knew how searchingly, into Lilla's lovely, truthful eyes, and delicately-moulded, sensitive face.

After they had had what at Baycombe Cottage was called *déjeuner,* Mrs. Carteret spent a few moments alone with her son, and when she had heard the little he vouchsafed to tell her of his amazingly quick courtship, and after she had learnt something of Lilla's present way of life in London, and of her night work in the munitions factory, she said quietly:

"I wish that you would leave her here, with me, for a few days. She looks very tired, and if your marriage is really to take place in about a fortnight, my dearest, it would do her good to have a little rest and change first."

But he answered at once, with less deference to her opinion than he generally showed, "Oh, no, Mum! I can't spare her to you just now. Besides, she wouldn't like to give up her work at such short notice. Even as it is, she will have to make all sorts of arrangements——"

And so Mrs. Carteret held her peace. But even so, when she bade Lilla good-bye, she said, "Perhaps you will come down and stay with me, here, a day or two before your wedding?"

And Lilla, pressing the frail, thin hand, answered, in a low voice, "Oh, how I should like to do that! But somehow I don't feel as if I can leave him—" She added, a little shyly, and naïvely, "He says he found his evenings so lonely before he met me."

For a few days everything went well—better than it had ever gone before with the lovers. Carteret, at last, was ecstatically happy—happy as only the lover feels who finds in his beloved a treasure which he divines was hidden till he came. . . .

But the change, the revolution, in Lilla's own inner life was too great for her to be able to go on, as she tried to do, exactly in the old way. And on the Thursday night of that eventful week, just as Carteret was about to walk with her to the factory, grumbling, a little fiercely perhaps, that their evening in her sitting-room must be cut short, as it was Savings Bank night, Lilla, in his arms, burst into bitter sobs.

"It isn't anything," she gasped, "only that I'm tired, and that it seems so strange to think that after next week I shall *only* be taking the Savings Bank! It—it makes me feel selfish—almost wicked. But I know that I'm foolish—please forgive me, Dare, I won't be so silly again——"

But Carteret was startled, rendered so uneasy, indeed, that when he got home, after having waited at the factory for Lilla—a very pale, subdued Lilla—he rang up his mother. He knew that the telephone was always moved up to her bedroom each evening, but this was the first night he had made use of it, for none of the extraordinary events which certain people then confidently expected, rather than dreaded, had come to pass. There had been no invasion, not even a Zeppelin raid threatened over the south coast.

And, as the result of his reluctant confidences, he drove Lilla down the next evening to Baycombe, there to stay till the day before the Saturday which was to be their wedding-day.

When the two who loved him best in the world stood at the gate, watching him start for his lonely night journey back to London, Mrs. Carteret, leaning heavily on her left stick, put her arm round Lilla's shoulder.

"Before I was married," she murmured, "I went into retreat for a whole week at the convent where I had been brought up, and I have often thought since how good a preparation it was for married life!"

And then, as if speaking to herself, she said something which rather startled Lilla, and which she thought exaggerated. *"L'Amour,"* said Mrs. Carteret musingly, and her voice lingered over the beautiful word, *"L'Amour est un fardeau que l'on porte à deux,* and sometimes, dear child, it takes a little while, for the woman, at any rate, to become accustomed to the dear burden."

At the end of that week Carteret came down again, and his presence added to, rather than interrupted, the happy peace. But he was intensely reserved, and when alone with his mother and Lilla, it was to his mother that he seemed to pay most court, to her that he talked eagerly of all he was doing to the curious little house which was to be his and Lilla's first married home. The lovers left Mrs. Carteret very little alone; both seemed quite content to remain in her company. And when, on the Sunday evening, Lilla walked with Carteret to Baycombe station, each knew that when they met again, it would be in the monastery chapel, on their marriage-day.

During those days spent by them alone together, Mrs. Carteret heard everything that there was to hear of Lilla's past life—indeed, that life at once so eventless and so full of the monotonous happenings that make up so many feminine existences, seemed spread out, like a map, before the older woman.

She visioned the quiet childhood and girlhood, broken by happy holidays at Appledean; the mother's gradual slipping out of life; and the year from eighteen to nineteen at Appledean, which had been followed by the short joint-life with the brother who was so dear to Lilla, great as was the difference in age between them, and though they had only met once in these last ten years.

With a painful, sharper interest, Mrs. Carteret divined the various reasons which had brought about Lilla's untoward marriage to Robert Singleton. And as she listened to Lilla's confidences, the older woman, who had always been vividly interested in human nature and human nature's varying manifestations, felt as if she came to know, with an almost too intimate knowledge, the people who had lived, and who still lived, at Number 19, FitzClarence Crescent.

She pictured a small procession, headed by stern, hard, old Mrs. Singleton; and composed of James

Temple, and pretty, not kindly, rather silly Jenny, his wife; of Louisa Lark-Wright, honest, downright, unattractive; and Louisa's husband, Philip the painter. She realised, as Lilla happily had never realised, the temptations which might so persuasively have beset, in the midst of such mundane, earthy surroundings, a woman at once so reticent and so sensitive, so fastidious and so passionate, as this woman whom her son now loved.

Lilla read Mrs. Carteret the letter in which she told the Singleton family of her approaching marriage. It was addressed to Louisa Lark-Wright, and though she knew she could count on Louisa's kindness, and even sympathy, she had found it a difficult letter to write.

"I have only known Mr. Darrell Carteret a short time. He is a friend of my cousin, George Gasparin. He is engaged in Government work, and so we shall live in Westminster."

In a postscript she added the words:

"I hope, dear Louisa, that you and I will not lose sight of one another. I shall never forget yours and Philip's kindness to me over so many years."

But there was another letter of which she said nothing to Mrs. Carteret, and that letter she found infinitely more difficult to compose, for it was to Cecil Sturges. To him she found she could only tell the bare fact of her marriage; and she was touched to tears when she received from him, in answer, a really noble letter, wishing her all happiness.

There fell one shadow over those happy, peaceful days at Baycombe Cottage. That was when Lilla told Mrs. Carteret that she could never hope to have a child. "Will you write and tell him?" she asked. And the answer came—written across a piece of paper headed *"Private. Destroy this when read."*—"Tell her I should be jealous of a child—that I only think of, only want *her!*"

And Mrs. Carteret, as she burnt the paper on which Carteret's hand had written in rough, shaken characters this message, felt suddenly afraid.

It is an awful thing to build up the whole of one's House of Life on one poor, frail, fallible human being. Yet that was what her son was now doing. So troubled and fearful was Mrs. Carteret that she said a word to her kind old friend, the Abbot, and he, an experienced, indulgent man of the world, nodded, and observed, "Pagans sometimes know what they're talking about! There's a great Pagan, by name Anatole France, with whom since this war I have felt in strong sympathy. One phrase of his, written many years ago, shows a disturbing knowledge of our poor human heart: *'L'amour est comme la dévotion, il vient tard—on n'est guère amoureux ni dévot à vingt ans.'* "

CHAPTER XII

IT was Saturday, the ninth of October, Lilla's wedding morning; and by half-past eight she was already up and standing by the window of her bedroom at Appledean.

St. Martin's summer is the loveliest season of the year in West Sussex, and the arboretum was now a mass of exquisite autumn tints. The night before there had been a mist rising from off the sea, but now the sun was shining resplendently, and the brilliant, clear beauty of colouring on which she gazed, and the delicate pungent scents which mounted up to her through the open window, seemed to bring all Nature into sympathy with the new, intense perceptions and sensations which now filled her soul and body.

Feeling that she was living in a wonderful dream which could not endure, Lilla put her hand over her eyes, and, for a few moments, she shut out the glowing loveliness before her. Her heart flew to Baycombe Cottage—to her lover and to his mother. With a mingling of rapture and of fear, she reminded herself that she had only known Dare Carteret for five weeks and three days, and Mrs. Carteret only a fortnight to-day—yet they had become her very heart of life. . . .

At last she turned away from the window, and going across to the old-fashioned, chintz-covered sofa which stood at the end of the bed, she knelt down, and said the few simple prayers she had always uttered each night and morning since she was a child. But, after having finished her prayers, she went on kneeling, with her face buried in her hands.

The bedroom door opened quietly, and Mrs. Gasparin walked in. As she saw Lilla on her knees she stopped short, many contradictory feelings flooding her restless, anxious, loving heart.

In this last fortnight Mabel Gasparin had felt as if her dearest, nay her only close, friend was slipping away from her into a rarefied atmosphere where she, Mabel, could not breathe. She had been awed, made afraid, by the intensity of feeling which the sudden awakening of love had brought to Lilla. Sometimes she had wondered a little sorely if Carteret realised how rare and precious a thing he had found. But she need not have feared, for Carteret—happy Carteret!—knew.

And then, as she saw Lilla kneeling there—she had never seen Lilla kneel before—Mabel Gasparin asked herself, with yet another pang of jealous pain, "I wonder if she is going to become a Roman Catholic——?" But there was no such thought in Lilla's heart, and during the days that she and Mrs. Carteret spent together, the Catholic religion had not once been mentioned between them.

Lilla was naturally aware that Mrs. Carteret spent a certain number of the hours of each day in the monastery chapel, and she had come dimly to understand that the suffering life of Carteret's mother was governed and sweetened in a great measure by her faith. But, perhaps owing to the fact that she had lived so many years of her life, as a child and as a young girl, in France, the ceremonial side of the Catholic Church—that side which so often attracts, interests, fascinates, or shocks and fills with repugnance, the average non-Catholic—was accepted by her unquestioningly, and almost with kindly, affectionate indifference.

Also, truest reason of all, love was still so new and absorbing a guest in her heart that there seemed no room there for any other of those unseen presences which minister to our poor humanity.

But love, the still little known, if insistent, familiar, did not make Lilla selfish or forgetful, as he, alas! is so apt to do,—and when, rising from her knees, she saw Mabel standing just within the door, her face became illumined with a beautiful and moving expression of gratitude and tenderness.

She went up to the other woman and put her arms about her neck.

"There's only one thing that makes me sad to-day," she murmured. "If only George were here, I should feel I had nothing left to wish for! It must be hard for you, poor dear, to see *us* together——"

And that was true. When Mabel had seen Lilla and Carteret together a week ago, there had swept over her an intolerable, aching longing for her George. The dread that he might vanish in that terrible, silent, dramatic way in which so many English men had vanished, this last year, out of their dear loves' lives, had haunted her anew, with an awful dread that would not be stilled. But she had hidden, with a kind of Spartan Boy courage, the terrors which beset her, and she had done her best to rejoice whole-heartedly in Lilla's happiness.

"Dare telephoned just now," she exclaimed, trying to speak lightly, "and I think he was rather disappointed you weren't down—that he couldn't speak to you! But I told him that, according to my old-fashioned notions, it wasn't right that he should even speak to you before he sees you in church. He was quite reasonable about it, but still, if it would give you a moment's pleasure, Lilla darling, I can at once get through again."

But the other shook her head. "Oh, no," she said, smiling, "I don't want to speak to Dare in that way now. I feel exactly as you feel about it!"

After Mabel had helped Lilla to put on the smoke grey gown which was to be her wedding garment, the two walked off quietly together, through the arboretum, and up the great avenue of beech trees, to the little gate which led to the downs.

A natural instinct had made Lilla desire that her second marriage should be utterly unlike, in every detail, the marriage which had taken place nearly twelve years ago, and so everything connected with to-day's ceremony, and what was to follow after, was to be peculiar, unconventional, and a law unto itself.

But as the two walked along the path cut into the chalk, both outwardly as serene as if they were simply taking an early morning walk, Mabel Gasparin's mind flew back, in spite of herself, to Lilla's other wedding-day.

The mother of Captain Gasparin's bride-elect had chaperoned both the brides, for one night, at the Langham Hotel, and it was there that George and Mabel had joined their young cousin the evening before the double wedding.

She remembered the look of the hotel sitting-room, of which the huge window overlooked the church where the two marriages were to be celebrated the next day. The room had been littered with bandboxes and tissue-paper, and in the midst of a kind of general fuss and untidiness she, Mabel, had tried to have some talk with Lilla. At that time she had known very little of George's favourite cousin, yet she remembered, even now, the pang of pity she had felt for the charming, sensitive-looking girl, and how she had wondered whether Lilla could really be in love with jovial Robert Singleton—for at that time jovial was the word which best described the happy Robert.

She sighed a quick, sharp sigh as she looked back to those cloudless days—for at the time of Lilla's first marriage, she, Mabel Gasparin, had been in the ecstatic period of early married life with a man she adored, and she had pitied, with deep, wordless pity, those women who were not as fortunate as herself.

And now she wondered uneasily if Lilla also remembered as vividly as she herself remembered, that far-away time. But looking down into her companion's serene, yet flushed and joyous face, she realised, with a sharp feeling of relief, that Lilla's memories of her former married life had become if not wholly effaced, then dim, and ever receding further and further away.

Only a very few people were gathered together in the monastery chapel. The tiny congregation was mainly composed of the upper servants at Appledean, and with them was Josephine, Mrs. Carteret's old

French *bonne à tout faire,* who still called the bridegroom, "Monsieur Darrell," and treated him with an affectionate, confidential familiarity which diverted Mabel.

Even to the bride's being a quarter of an hour too early, this wedding was unlike other weddings. But the bridegroom had already long been waiting by the altar rails. He had not chosen to have a best man, so he stood there quite alone, his rather stern-featured face paler than usual, his eyes burning. . . .

Mrs. Carteret was in her usual place. She was wearing a silk dress of an old-fashioned make, which Mabel Gasparin had never seen her wear before, and over her plainly braided grey hair was draped a black lace mantilla. So there was a quaint, rather pathetic look of gala about the little standing figure which bent forward, supported, as always, on her two ivory-headed sticks.

The French Abbot, determined to do honour to the lady whom he always called "Notre chère Madame Carteret," had gone as far as was possible in giving pomp and grace to what was after all a mixed marriage. Just as if the wedding had been taking place in France, two gorgeous red and yellow velvet-covered chairs had been placed before the altar. Some of the people in that tiny congregation wondered where they had come from, but Mrs. Gasparin and her housekeeper knew them with a familiar knowledge, for they were part of the furniture of the state bedroom of Appledean House where George the Fourth had once slept when a storm had delayed him on his way to Brighton.

Mabel had never before been present at a Catholic marriage, and there were several little points about the brief ceremony which interested and surprised her. The covering of Lilla's head because she was a widow; the loosing and unloosing of hands, as first the man and then the woman repeated the solemn promises in words the order of which seemed at once curiously familiar and strange, for the sentences did not run quite as had those in which she and George had plighted their troth thirteen years before. Here, too, was no promise of obedience on the part of wife to husband, though in the blessing of the ring came the supplication "that she, abiding in Thy peace, and in obedience to Thy will, may ever live with him in love unchanging."

And then the good Abbot gave the newly-married pair a short address in French; but long before he had come to the end Mabel was crying, for it was an address, not about marriage, but about the war, which, said the old Frenchman gravely, must fill their thoughts even now, even on so peaceful and joyous an occasion as that which had brought them here to-day. "Might not such an alliance as that of France and England be compared with Christian marriage?" he asked searchingly, "for were not those two great nations joined together to fight the good fight for right against wrong, for loyalty against treachery, for kindness against cruelty?"

The wedding feast was served in the monks' refectory, and there were all sorts of peculiar French sweets and pastries, prepared by an old lay brother who, as a youth, had been employed in the Empress Eugénie's kitchens at the Tuileries.

And after the little refection was over, Mabel

Gasparin bade a temporary farewell to bride and bridegroom, and she was touched when Carteret bent forward and, kissing her, muttered, "You have been a good, good friend to me—and I shall ever be eternally grateful!" Then she got into the car which had come to fetch her, and so went on into Sanchester, to the Red Cross Hospital, there to do a long, hard afternoon's work.

As for Lilla and Carteret, they were content to pursue the unusual course which they seemed determined should distinguish their marriage-day. Thus they stayed on with Mrs. Carteret through the afternoon, till Mabel, on her way back from Sanchester, came and drove them to the station, for they had arranged to go straight back to the little house in Westminster which Lilla had never seen, though her few personal possessions had been taken there the day before.

It was after ten when the train reached Victoria Station, and Lilla, to Carteret's secret satisfaction, said that she would prefer to walk—home. And so, becoming merged in the crowds which always come and go on any fine evening near a great railway terminus, they started off, neither saying much to the other, to find themselves very soon in the peaceful, deep, war-darkness of Westminster's narrow streets and byways.

Above them, across the now moonless, star-powdered sky, the searchlights, seeking for Zeppelins, threw their great shafts, forming huge arabesques of gleaming light upon the deep blue firmament. And here and there, as if playing hide-and-seek with the broad beams of lambent brilliance, darted quick-moving little shadowy white lights. As they danced about, these little darting lights looked like flower petals flung this way and that, by eager, fairy fingers. The fingers, maybe, of fairies who once belonging to Merrie England—to the Old Country—were now eager to pit their tiny might against the Enemy Dragons of the sky.

Now and again the two lovers would stay their steps and look upwards, awed by the uncanny splendour of the sight above them.

As they walked on, the thoroughfares through which they passed grew more and more deserted, till at last they came to an even deeper darkness and solitude,—the maze of eighteenth-century streets which still nestle behind Westminster Abbey. These streets were built on what was once a place of sanctuary for the criminals and the hunted of mediæval London, and there still seems to linger about them an atmosphere of peace, and of relief from fear.

Nearer to the river, the autumnal night air grew a thought keener, and soon a sudden turning brought them to an open space, close to the Embankment. Before them was a short, straight street of low houses, bounded at the further end by the austere, rectangular lines of a squarely-set white stone Georgian church.

Carteret put his right arm round Lilla's shoulder and guided her across the wind-swept space; and they began walking up the street, towards the church. Every house was closely shuttered, and only their footfalls echoed on the narrow pavement. As they paced along, he kept his arm about her, and she felt as if they had but one heart-beat between them.

All at once he stopped, and in a low, muffled voice he said, "It's here. We've arrived——"

Lilla saw, in the dim, shadowed lamp-light, a low door let into a strip of wall between two of the houses to her left. Above the door was a fanlight framed in wrought iron.

Carteret put his key in the door, and moved aside for her to pass through into a narrow passage lit only by the fanlight. But as they stepped into the paved courtyard beyond, the searchlight by Lambeth Palace, just over the river, suddenly flung its exultant beam right across the sky above them, and against the lighted shaft of sky, Lilla saw sharply outlined the pointed gables, and the old tiled roof, of her new home.

They stood for a moment, and looked up, silently, and then Carteret, moving forward, lifted the latch of the house door—no need for locks or keys in this remote and secret place.

"Love?" he whispered, "dear love—will you come in?"

PART TWO

PART TWO

CHAPTER XIII

IT was Tuesday, the 23rd May, 1916, and the eve of Mrs. Singleton's seventieth birthday.

Her wheel-chair had been drawn up close to the middle window of her bedroom. By her side was a table, on which there lay three books, a Bible, a prayer book, and a volume of Tennyson, "The Princess," which had been given to her by her husband when they were first engaged. Under "The Princess" was a wedge of newspaper cuttings, kept together by a broad elastic band.

Since the day James Temple's trial had ended with a verdict of Guilty, and the passing of a sentence which meant that he would be in prison for five years, Mrs. Singleton had not been downstairs.

She had had about that time, though not in connection with anything specially exciting or painful, a rather bad heart attack, and her doctor had said that henceforth it would be better for her to keep to one floor. So a room next her bedroom, the little room just under what had once been Lilla's sitting-room, had been hastily prepared as a kind of boudoir for the old lady. But she hated the room, and never went into it unless she was about to receive a visit from either Cecil Sturges or her solicitor. Most of her life, the life which now seemed so dreary, so empty of interest, while filled with a kind of dull, vicarious shame, was spent in her large, airy bedroom, and, when she was up and dressed, in a chair drawn close to a window.

Just before the opening of what had been so unfairly described as the Singleton Case, Jenny Temple and her children had moved permanently into Number 19. But their presence there had not been the success that every one had confidently predicted it would be. Jenny had been her own mistress too long to like living in some one else's house. As for the children, the two elder Temples were very like their father, and their grandmother never saw them without being reminded of him.

There was also trouble among the servants. Mrs. Temple had brought with her a rather pert parlourmaid to take the place of Bartlett, and the old mistress of Number 19 felt convinced that it was this woman who made the trouble in the house.

And then there was another, and to Mrs. Singleton, a more serious reason for concern. Jenny herself had changed,—surprisingly, or so at least her mother believed. The awful thing which had happened to poor Jenny, instead of making her subdued and sad, had suddenly caused her to become frivolous, and what in old days the more old-fashioned members of that circle would have called "fast."

When Mrs. Singleton's own children had been small she had always taken them, however busy she might be, for half an hour every morning for Bible instruction and reading, and for an hour late in the afternoon—the "children's hour," as, to her thinking, Longfellow so beautifully called it.

But Jenny did neither the one thing nor the other.

She was always what her mother, in her own mind, called "gadding about," first with one friend and then with another. Also, she was constantly out in the evening; and very soon Mrs. Singleton realised that Jenny was often called for at the door by a gentleman—not always the same gentleman, of course,—but Mrs. Singleton thought it an extraordinary thing that a young married woman, whose husband for any cause is absent, should wish to go out with other men.

Jenny's conduct in this matter so troubled her mother that at last she broke through her habit of reserve, and mentioned the matter to Louisa, only, however, to get very small comfort in return.

"Jenny's only doing now what all the people with whom she's now lived for so long, ever since she married in fact, have always been doing. The fact that she is what I believe they call a 'grass widow,' makes it seem natural to them. You'll never alter it, mother! No, if I were you, I should *not* speak to her. You don't want her to go away and live by herself, do you?"

And Mrs. Singleton said sombrely, "No, I certainly do not wish that."

In the days which retrospectively seemed to have been so happy and so peaceful, Robert and Lilla had never given the slightest trouble in the house. Indeed, so small an impression had Lilla made on Number 19 that now no one ever thought of her there.

Mrs. Singleton had even begun to feel glad that her daughter-in-law had married again—though it had been an intense relief to her that Lilla had not married Cecil Sturges. In this connection, Mrs. Singleton sometimes nursed a slight feeling of resentment against her daughter Jenny; for it was Jenny who had originally put the idea into her mind that Cecil was fond of Lilla. She now believed this to have been a fable, and she was ashamed of ever having thought that Robert's trusted friend had been attracted by Robert's wife.

Cecil Sturges used to come regularly to see the old lady, and she looked forward with eagerness to his visits. She hoped he would come to-day. But it was now only four o'clock, and he was not likely to look in till five, or a little after, on his way back from his office. Sturges was fond of the younger Temple children, Bob and Louie, and sometimes, when he was there, Mrs. Singleton would send for them, and they would all spend a happy little time together in that ugly new sitting-room of hers, next door.

Mrs. Singleton turned herself about with slow deliberateness, and looked out of the window. It was certainly a very beautiful afternoon, the sort of afternoon which, in old days, would have tempted her to take a drive in the jobbed carriage which used to come for orders three times a week, but which she had given up early in the war.

Before the war, on such an afternoon as this, in the beginning of the London season, there would have been an unceasing procession of taxis and private cars spinning by on the road below. But now the broad thoroughfare was deserted. It might have been a country road, for all the traffic that there was.

Mrs. Singleton's ears were still very good, and now they were filled with the triumphant cooing and tweeting of mating birds. As she listened to the happy sounds her sad, severe old face softened. . . .

And then, all at once, there came the ugly, impatient whirr of a motor, rushing down the road,—a moment later, with a jarring, grinding sound, it drew up somewhere close by, under the window.

It was a taxi, and out of the taxi there stepped a broad-shouldered man in khaki. His uniform, like his cap, looked quite new, and indeed it was new, for he had only got it that morning. Though it was made by an excellent tailor—his own tailor, in fact—it was a misfit, made for another man, a poor chap who had been killed just before this bright, smart-looking new uniform could be delivered, as it was to have been, on the first day of the now dead man's first "leave."

The sight of an officer getting out of a taxi at a house in FitzClarence Crescent had nothing about it at all surprising; it was the kind of thing that was always happening now. But few taxi-drivers were as fortunate as was the taxi-driver of this particular officer, for his fare handed him a ten-shilling note, smiling as he did so. "I don't believe I shall ever get used to this queer paper money!" he said; and then, seeing the man pull a handful of silver and coppers out of his pocket, he added, in his pleasant, hearty voice, "You can keep the change; but just put that bag down on the doorstep."

The driver noticed that the bag was quite new, and yet quite full. Gentlemen coming back from the Front do want a new lot of clothes sometimes.

The soldier rang the bell of Number 19, and then waited, impatiently. Perhaps it was because he was so terribly impatient, so eager to see those whom he believed to be behind that door, that the time seemed unnaturally long. But Bartlett had always been a slow-coach!

He rang again, and a moment later a young woman, dressed far more smartly than Bartlett used to dress, with a rather cross, disagreeable expression on her face, opened the door. But when she saw that it was a gentleman—an officer—standing there, her face became a little less unamiable.

"I suppose Mrs. Singleton is at home?"

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Singleton is at home; but she's in her bedroom, sir. She doesn't generally see any one excepting by appointment."

"Isn't she well? I mean, is she less well than usual?"

"Well, sir, Mrs. Singleton hasn't been very well for a long time. Since last November, I think it was, she's not come downstairs at all. Would you like to see Mrs. Temple, sir? I know she's in."

The stranger had caught sight of a perambulator in the hall. "Is Mrs. Temple stopping here?" he asked abruptly.

And the maid, looking a little surprised, answered: "Oh, yes, sir. She lives here altogether now. Mrs. Temple gave up her house last autumn." And even he noticed that there came a very odd expression over the young woman's face. It was as if she could have said a good deal more.

A supreme question trembled on the stranger's lips, but he did not like the look of this new parlour-maid, so he did not put the question. Besides, his common sense had suddenly told him that it was indeed unlikely that the person for whom he longed to inquire was still living here, with Mrs. Singleton and Mrs. Temple.

"Who shall I say, sir?"

He hesitated. "Just tell Mrs. Temple that a gentleman has come to see her. I'll go through into the study, and wait for her there."

He walked across the threshold of the home, past that odd-looking, rather shabby perambulator, and so into the big gloomy room behind the dining-room.

There, in the study, nothing was changed, excepting that he noticed with surprise and disgust that dust lay thick on the big writing-table. Even the ivory paper-knife was grey with it.

But when a man has been away from his home for very nearly two years, and when for hundreds of days of those two years he has led an utterly unnatural life, he is apt to feel, as this man had already said to himself more than once this day, like Rip van Winkle.

Still, these few hours of London—he had arrived at eleven, and it was now four o'clock—had worked wonders with him. He began to feel himself again his old pre-war self.

After calling at his tailor's and his hatter's, he had gone straight to the War Office. They had kept him there for hours, and it had rather staggered him to realise what a very important person his strange series of adventures had made him in the eyes of the people there.

Not till he actually was in the taxi, on his way to FitzClarence Crescent, had he realised how easy it would have been for him to have sent a preparatory telegram as forerunner of his arrival. But telegrams are things the existence of which you are apt to forget when you have spent some hundreds of days without either receiving, or being able to send out, a single communication with the outside world.

Of course he knew that anything might have come to pass while he had been away, and he had lived so near to death for so long that it was death which seemed the most natural explanation of Jenny's presence at Number 19. Temple must have died, and Jenny, now a widow, had come to live with her mother. He could not see Temple, in any circumstances, leaving his comfortable house to live in another person's house, least of all in his mother-in-law's.

Though he had been taken aback at hearing that Jenny was now living at Number 19, he couldn't help being glad that he was going to see her now.

Jenny was so—well, yes, so commonplace! It wouldn't upset her, as it would certainly upset Louisa, suddenly to see some one whom she had mourned as dead, appear again very much alive!

He knew that he had been mourned as dead, for the people at the War Office had told him—breaking it very kindly and delicately to him—that he had been reported as killed some time in the August of 1914. Lord! How very, very long ago that seemed now.

He walked over to the one large window, outside which there was only a blank wall; and then, impatiently, he turned and moved back, towards the door. Why was Jenny so long?

At last the door opened, and he heard uttered, in eager, coquettish, rather excited accents, the words: "I didn't expect you quite so soon! I'm sorry I've kept you waiting——" And then an extraordinary change in the voice—a sudden cry of amazement, almost of terror: "Robert? *Robert?* ROBERT!"

Yes, it was Jenny,—but Jenny looking, in her brother's astonished eyes, like a regular figure of fun! She was in a pale blue frock, the skirt of which stopped short half-way down her legs—like a little girl—and on her head was a purple hat, the shape of a French jam-pot, squashed down on her forehead. He couldn't help seeing that she looked younger and prettier than usual,—but, as the brother and sister stared at one another, her fair face turned very pale, and there came a wild, terrified look in her eyes.

He hurried up to her, and grasped her gloved hand in his. "Yes!" he exclaimed. "Yes, old girl,—it's Robert sure enough—Robert come back from the dead!"

He half led, half supported her to the old-fashioned leather-covered couch, and then sat himself down by her, and patted her hand.

"Come, come," he said, trying to laugh. "It's all right. But I don't wonder you're upset! They tell me at the War Office that it's already happened before several times—that a man's been reported dead, when he was alive all the time. Still, they've not yet had one who disappeared for as long a time as *I* did——"

"But how—?" gasped Jenny, "—but why, Robert?" and then she stopped, feeling as if her lips could not articulate the question.

"How comes it that I'm alive, after all? Well, it's a long story! Still, if I'm here to-day, I owe it to an awfully kind old fellow, one of the gentlemen-in-waiting to that poor Empress of Mexico—perhaps you've never heard of her, eh, Jenny? I never had, I confess!"

"Yes, I think I have," said Jenny in a shaken tone. "You mean the mad one?"

"Yes, the mad one! She lives in Belgium, and though she was a Belgian princess, her husband was an Austrian archduke,—so the Germans treated *her* all right. As for my friend, he'd had an English wife, who died on their honeymoon. And though that was nearly fifty years ago, and I gather he'd had a good many other loves since, it was for her sake—in memory of her, that he saved me! I've lived hidden in his house ever since he found me, wounded and nearly naked, in a shed where I managed to crawl after a couple of those devils had stripped me of my uniform. You see, they threw away some little things of mine which were afterwards found by our fellows,—that naturally made them think I'd been in a batch of killed who were buried hastily."

"And how did you get away?" Jenny was now staring into his worn face, her eyes still clouded with fear and trouble.

"I can't tell you that—I gave my word of honour not to say. But I only got into Holland the day before yesterday, and arrived in London this morning! I had, of course, to go straight and report myself to the War Office. I've been there ever since——" He waited a moment, and then, in a very different voice, asked, "Where's Lilla?"

"I—I don't know——"

"You don't know!" he exclaimed.

"I think Appledean always finds her."

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"Oh, yes, of course—how stupid of me not to have thought of that——"

He was relieved, but still rather puzzled. Somehow—up to to-day—he had always thought of Lilla as being at Number 19.

"And now, Jenny, how about mother? I'm afraid she must be pretty bad, or James would never have allowed you to come and be here with the children."

And then, to his great discomfiture, Jenny burst into bitter tears. She covered her face with her hands, but he saw the tears trickling through her fingers—fingers still clothed in pale grey kid.

Shaken with agonising sobs, which became more and more violent, poor Jenny looked very pitiable, dressed up in all that absurd finery. Her brother felt distressed and shocked at her agitation.

A very unpleasant suspicion insinuated itself into his mind.

James Temple? Was it conceivable that James had been up to any tricks? James's marriage, after all, had been a *mariage de convenance*. It had suited him very well to marry Mrs. Singleton's younger daughter. But he had never seemed really fond of Jenny—nor she of him—as he, Robert, and Lilla were fond of one another. Still, the idea of James getting into any kind of moral scrape seemed preposterous.

"What's the matter?" he asked rather sharply. "Surely, Jenny—surely you and James have not separated?"

She nodded her head, and then shook it. "No, not exactly," she murmured.

"D'you mean you left him—to come and live here with mother?"

And again she made that queer gesture of half assent and half dissent. "It seemed wiser to get rid of the house," she said in a constrained voice. "We've been in great money trouble—James and I."

"Oh, is that all?"—he was relieved. And then, anxiously: "But mother's all right about money, eh? The business is all right, I suppose, in spite of the war?"

She lifted her head, and stopped crying. "Yes," she said firmly, "the business is all right now. A friend of Cecil Sturges has come into the firm. Cecil has been a brick."

"He would be," said Robert. "Good old Cecil! He'd be surprised if he knew how often I thought of him,—when I'd nothing else to think about!"

There came a loud knock and a ring at the front door, and before either of them could do anything to prevent it, the parlour-maid had shown a visitor into the study.

It was another soldier—a remarkably handsome man, a good many years younger than Robert Singleton.

Jenny got up, and with her back to the light, she said nervously, "Captain Folliett?—My brother, Captain Singleton." And then she went on breathlessly, "I'm so sorry,—but I can't come out this afternoon! You see, my brother's sudden arrival has taken us by surprise. My mother doesn't even know that he's alive yet!"

The good-looking soldier seemed greatly disappointed, in fact quite angry for a moment, but at last, with an obvious effort, he pulled himself together.

"I quite understand!" he exclaimed, "and I'll make your excuses to the Percivals. I suppose all your plans will depend on Captain Singleton for the next few days?"

Falteringly, regretfully, Jenny said, "Yes," and the other, after shaking hands with them both, got himself out of the room as quickly as possible.

Robert, much surprised, turned to his sister. Even in his present state of agitation there was room in his mind for astonishment at that unexpected apparition. Folliett? He'd never heard the name; neither did Jenny's late visitor look the sort of man who came and went to Number 19, or, for the matter of that, to the Temples' own house, in the old days.

"Captain Folliett's a great friend of the Percivals. You remember the Percivals, don't you, Robert?"

Robert thought he did, vaguely.

"The Percivals were going out motoring this afternoon, and they'd asked me to come too. Captain Folliett offered to take me there, and we were all going down to Guildford——" She spoke in an awkward, apologetic tone, and her brother felt vaguely uncomfortable.

For the first time since he had come to Number 19—it was an odd thing that the presence of this complete stranger for three minutes in the study should have done it—Robert Singleton felt as if his return had upset things, as if he was not wanted any more.

It was a horrible sensation.

"Now, how about mother?" he asked abruptly. "I suppose she ought to be prepared in some way——"

"Oh, yes!" a look of indecision and fear came over Jenny's tear-stained face. "Of course mother must be prepared—I'm afraid you'll think her rather changed, Robert. She has got very frail and old-looking lately."

"To-morrow's her birthday—she'll be seventy to-morrow."

"Yes, I know she will; the children have made her some such pretty little presents! But about now—I think the best thing will be for me to telephone for Louisa."

"Is there a telephone *here,* in Number 19?"

As he asked this question, Robert Singleton smiled. It was the first time he had felt inclined to smile to-day. Jenny had always been a great one for the telephone. She had had an immense circle of idle-busy folk who were always ringing her up, and sometimes, in the old days, when he and Lilla had been dining there, Robert had wondered how Temple could stand it.

But no answering smile met his. "Oh, yes, I got the telephone put in as soon as I moved here. I couldn't have lived without it, so Cecil hurried them up. But mother doesn't know. It's down in the pantry, and up in my bedroom—nowhere else. I'll go off, and get on to Louisa now. You'll stay in here, won't you?" she shot him a nervous glance. "It wouldn't do for mother suddenly to hear of your having come. It might kill her right out, you know."

He nodded, and she left the room.

A few moments after she had gone, he went over to the writing-table.

It was clear that no one ever used that table now, for not only was there dust on it, but there was no note-paper laid out, and the pens had gone rusty.

He opened a drawer. Yes, there was writing-paper there, but the top sheet was covered with the fine, light grey grime of London. It gave him an eerie feeling. It seemed to prove how very, very long he had been away from this, his own room.

He pushed off the dirty top sheet, and lifted out some of the clean under ones. Then he took up a pen—but there was no ink in the inkstand.

Stop a moment, though!—he knew where the ink had always been kept. Turning round on the swivel chair, he opened a cupboard which formed the bottom of the bookcase just behind him.

Yes! There was the great bottle of writing ink. He pulled out the cork, and it was with a feeling of relief that he found there was still some ink in the bottom of the bottle. He poured it into the inkstand, took a clean sheet of paper, and began writing.

He put the date, "May 23rd, 1916." And then he hesitated a few moments. Somehow, he felt this to be a very solemn letter, and as he wrote the next three words, "My dearest wife," there came a choky sensation in his throat. But he went on, writing very quickly, for he wanted to have finished the letter before Jenny's return:

"My Dearest Wife,

"Before you get this you will have received two telegrams which will in a measure have prepared you for my return.

"Through God's great mercy, which He knows I have done nothing to deserve, I have been spared to come back, as from the dead.

"I am fairly well, though I shall never be again the

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man to whom you said good-bye nearly two years ago. I feel, I look, full ten years older.

"I am writing this in the old study, before I see my mother. Louisa has been sent for to prepare her.

"Of course I can make no plans—I cannot come to you, or even ask you to come to me—till I have seen mother. But before getting this letter you may have had a telegram telling you what I have been able to arrange. I believe I am to have a fortnight's leave—not longer, as I am now in a position to be very useful at G.H.Q."

He hesitated, then added the words:

"Darling, how I long to see my own dearest love."

He ended his letter—one of the very few he had ever written to Lilla in all their married life:

"Ever your devoted husband,
"ROBERT SINGLETON."

and putting it in an envelope, addressed it to:

"Mrs. Robert Singleton,
"Appledean House,
"Sussex."

If only all went pretty well, if only his mother would allow him to leave her this evening, he might with luck catch the 5.50 to Appledean, and be with Lilla to-night!

At that thought his heart overflowed with gratitude to God. Robert Singleton had always been a sincerely religious man—Low Church, as was the way with the Singletons. Indeed, the only thing that ever really disturbed him about Lilla had been the fact that at one moment in their joint lives, when she had been about six-and-twenty, she had turned what Philip Lark-Wright had called, "a little High."

He slipped the envelope into one of the still unfamiliar pockets of his new uniform. He must go out presently and send off that first telegram. One of the girls (his sisters) would tell him how to word it.

It had been a shock not to find Lilla here, waiting for him, as it were, at Number 19; but it was very natural, after all, that she should be staying with that nice kind chap, George Gasparin, and with the equally kind, though not equally nice, Mabel Gasparin. Years ago he had heard a very queer story about Mrs. Gasparin. But, of course, he had never said anything of that ugly gossip to Lilla!

Robert Singleton had a real affection for Appledean. He remembered, now, how the stately beauty of the place had struck, and indeed overawed him, on his wedding-day. He and Lilla had been married late in April, at a time when the arboretum had been in full, early spring beauty.

If only his mother were well enough to spare him, he and Lilla might spend a week or ten days at Appledean together. It would be a kind of second honeymoon. But that, perhaps, was too good a thing to hope for—yet.

CHAPTER XIV

A QUARTER of an hour later, Louisa Lark-Wright stood outside her mother's bedroom door.

The ordeal which she was about to go through—that of breaking the glad, yet awesome news of Robert's return to Mrs. Singleton—was as nothing compared with the ordeal which she knew lay beyond. Still, she felt she would like to wait a few moments before opening the door. Louisa was aware that her own heart was not her strong point, but none of the people about her knew it, least of all Philip.

She and Robert, different as they were, had always been good friends, and, as quite young people, affectionate comrades. When they had first met, five minutes ago, each had clung to the other, and Louisa had shown far more agitation than her brother had expected. He had been much touched by her emotion, and he had inquired, solicitously, after Philip, for he had at once seen, when Louisa first came into the study, that she was wearing mourning.

The thought that that mourning could be for himself had never occurred to him, the more so that his other sister, Jenny, was wearing bright, light colours. But Louisa was one of the people who wear their clothes a very long time, and to-day, though it was such a warm day, she had on the thick black coat and skirt which she had first bought in the autumn of 1914. Just as Jenny always dressed too young, so Louisa always dressed too old.

At last Louisa opened the door, and walked into her mother's bedroom; and she looked so strange, so unlike herself, that Mrs. Singleton stood up in alarm.

"What's the matter?" she exclaimed. "Why, Louisa, you look dreadful! Has anything happened——" After a perceptible pause, she added, "To your husband, to Philip?"

Louisa shook her head, and tried to smile.

"Oh, no, mother. Something *has* happened, but it's something very good, that has made me feel very happy! Still, it's been a great shock, and—and I can't even now believe it's true——"

"Louisa?" Mrs. Singleton spoke in a very quiet, even voice, "I think I know what it is that makes you look so strange—I think you have come to tell me that Robert has come back."

"Mother! How did you know?"

The tears were now welling up into Louisa's already red-rimmed eyes, and rolling down Louisa's weather-beaten face.

"For the first time, this morning, there came to me a feeling that my boy might be alive—after all."

And then Mrs. Singleton's composure so far gave way that she sank back in her chair, and began trembling violently. She looked down at her shaking hands. "Bring him up!" she exclaimed. "Quickly—quickly, Louisa! I don't feel well. If I don't see him now, I may not see him before I die——"

But already Louisa was out of the room and hurrying, almost leaping, down the staircase.

She rushed into the study. "Come up at once, Robert!" she cried breathlessly. "Mother wants you! Mother knew!"

The two sisters waited in the dining-room, and of the two Jenny now seemed the most excited and restless. At last Louisa turned on her impatiently.

"Weren't you going out?" she asked curtly.

"Yes, I was going motoring with the Percivals. We weren't coming back till quite late to-night."

"When were they going to start?"

Jenny hesitated. She looked a little confused. "Oh, about half-past five, I should think—perhaps a little later, after Mr. Percival comes back from the City."

"If I were you, my dear, I should go just the same. If you do stay here, you won't see much of Robert. He's sure to stay with mother all the time. Besides, I shall be here."

"Will you really? Thank you so much! But don't you think he'll think it unkind? And what would mother say?"

"Mother needn't know. She won't think of us—of you and me—now that Robert's here."

There was a bitter touch in Louisa's voice. She had come much nearer to her mother lately. More kindly, she added: "Yes, do go, Jenny. I don't see why you shouldn't. After all, if mother hasn't told him, *I* shall have to tell him about all the trouble we've been through——"

A sullen look came over Jenny's pink-and-white face.

"I don't know why he should be told all that today," she said fretfully. "I think the poor fellow might be allowed to have one quiet evening at home without being told anything disagreeable."

And then she gave a kind of gasp—"Oh, Louisa!" she cried. "How dreadful! You'll have to tell him about Lilla! He did ask me where she was, but I only said she was at Appledean—that Appledean would always find her. She *is* there just now, isn't she?"

"Yes," said Louisa dully. "She is there, I know, for, as I told you yesterday, I rang up her house, and they said she was away for a few days."

"Yes, it *is* awful about Lilla," went on Jenny excitedly. "And also it's funny to think of such a little saint having lived with a man without being his wife! I suppose Robert will divorce her——"

"No, he will never do that," said Louisa coldly. Sometimes she felt as if she hated her pretty sister.

"D'you think he'd take her back?" and as Louisa nodded, Jenny went on: "I wonder if mother's telling him about Lilla now?"

Louisa Lark-Wright shook her head. "No," she said, at last, "I feel quite sure mother won't tell him about Lilla. She will leave the telling of *that* to me. But I do think, Jenny, that she's almost certain to tell him about James—that is the real reason why I think you'd better keep your engagement with the Percivals. Why should you be made miserable before you need be?"

Jenny came over to her sister, and kissed her with more affection that she had done for years, and that though Louisa had been very good to her during the terrible weeks before the case. "I *will* go," she exclaimed. "I'll slip out now, at once! I shall easily pick up a taxi somewhere."

Jenny had not been gone five minutes before Louisa heard her brother's heavy footsteps coming down the house. Though she longed, with a terrible intensity

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of longing, to be spared the awful task of telling Robert about Lilla, she yet feared to see the knowledge of it already in his face.

She pushed open the dining-room door and looked up at him.

One glance was enough. Robert had not been told.

He was coming downstairs, slowly, deliberately, and she saw that his face, though very stern and grave, was calm.

"Come in here, Louisa, into the study," he said, and then, in a low voice, "Is Jenny in the dining-room?"

"No, she's gone out. She had an engagement, and I thought it would be far better for her to keep it."

He looked relieved. "I'm glad of that," he exclaimed. "Poor Jenny! Poor, poor girl! I shouldn't have known what to say to her—I mean about James. It's a very bad business, Louisa,"—as if she didn't know that! "I want you to come in here and tell me more about it. Mother was so agitated that I didn't like to interrupt her, or to ask her any questions. I could see that her mind dwells persistently on the past, but, of course, what I want to know concerns the present. I can't make out who's running the business *now?*"

He spoke with evident pain, his face was deeply flushed,—and for the first time that day Louisa noticed that Robert's abundant fair hair was deeply streaked with grey. He looked at least ten years older than the man who had bidden them all so blithe a good-bye, twenty-one months ago.

Since he had come downstairs there was yet another new look on his honest face—a most painful look of shame, and of humiliation.

"I wonder," he said with an effort, "whether the War Office people knew to-day who I was—I mean, whether they knew that Temple is my brother-in-law, and that it was *my* firm?"

"It was entirely James's fault," she said quickly. "The Judge said so. The Judge spoke very, very highly, not only of our father, but also of you, Robert."

He shook his head impatiently. "Yes, yes"—he exclaimed. "Mother told me all that! If I hadn't stopped her, she would have insisted on reading out the whole of the Judge's speech. Did you know that she always keeps the cuttings of the case close to her hand? She says she often turns up the light in the night, and reads them through."

"Yes, mother took it very hard," said Louisa in a low voice.

"I wonder it didn't kill her," he said bitterly. He waited for a moment, and then asked: "Is the business *really* all right?"

"I don't think you need worry about that," said Louisa slowly. "Cecil Sturges got hold of a very good man for us. His name's Tiverton. He's been to see mother two or three times. And then, of course, Mr. Boucher has been a great comfort. You see he was father's friend, as well as lawyer, for so very long." She added irrelevantly, "He never liked James. He didn't think him a gentleman."

"No," said Robert Singleton. "I remember that Mr. Boucher never did like James."

And then he suddenly turned on her: "But what an extraordinary thing that Jenny should take it as she seems to be doing! She looks a regular guy—I should hardly have known her for my sister! Are other women wearing those little-girl skirts?"

"Yes, they've been wearing them a long time now. But, Robert? Jenny's had a pretty rough time, you know. I think this—this dressing up and going out is a sort of rebound. I'm very sorry for her, and so is Philip."

"I say, Louisa—would you mind coming round to the post office with me?" he asked her suddenly. "I want to send a telegram to Lilla. I want to prepare her a bit—perhaps you could help me with what I ought to say. My idea is to send her a telegram *now,* hinting that I was not dead after all; and then in about an hour or so to send her another, saying I'm alive—just that, and nothing more. I've already written to her, but I'm in two minds about sending the letter, because, of course, when I wrote it, I didn't know about this awful business."

He added regretfully, "I'm afraid there isn't a hope of my getting down to Sussex this evening. I promised mother I'd go up to her again, in about half an hour. I see a great change in mother, Louisa."

"Yes," she answered, in a low, troubled voice. "There *is* a great change in mother. The doctor tells me that he believes the end is very near." And then, pressing her hands tightly together: "Robert? Don't let's go out just yet. I've something else to tell you——"

"Something else?"

"Yes. It's about Lilla."

She remained silent so long that at last the words, "Go on!" hoarsely escaped him.

"Lilla——" She waited a moment, and again she uttered the one word, the one name, which she knew meant everything to her brother. "Lilla——"

There was a further breathless pause. And then, finding no other way, she simply told the truth. "Lilla has married again," she said.

They had both been standing in the middle of the room, and now Robert Singleton turned slowly round, and, walking to the window, stared out on to the blank wall with unseeing eyes.

Louisa moved across to the sofa, and sat down, and at last she heard him say, the words sounding as if they came from afar off, for his back was still turned to her: "Then Jenny was right? I always knew in my heart that he liked her,—though I quite admit that he would never have made love to her while he thought me alive."

He stopped speaking; then he turned round and asked abruptly, "Is she really at Appledean,—or is that a lie?"

"I believe she's alone at Appledean."

"Thank God for that!" he said, and then he came over to the sofa, and sitting down actually tried to smile, as he took his sister's hand in his and patted it.

"Poor Louisa! Don't look like that, my dear. Don't be so upset," he said. And then, musingly, "I ought to have thought of it—yet somehow, of all the terrible things I thought about, I never thought of that!"

He got up, and stood looking down at her. "I've just got to face the fact *now, to-day,* and then I must try never to think of it again. After all, he's more to be pitied than I am——" The words came out in low, jerky sentences. Then he cried out suddenly, "Damn him! I oughtn't to want to damn poor old Cecil—but I do say, damn him! Why couldn't he have waited a little longer? Thank God, no one will ever expect me to see him again."

And then Louisa, getting off the sofa, said painfully, "It isn't Cecil Sturges, Robert; it's a stranger."

"A stranger?" He turned on her as though about to strike her. "What d'you mean, Louisa?"

"It's a friend of the Gasparins, and it was settled very quickly—in fact, they hadn't known each other much more than a month. She only wrote and told us a week before it happened."

"But Lilla's my wife!" he stammered. "The idea's preposterous! Nothing can alter the fact that she's *my* wife."

"Do you still wish her to be your wife, Robert?" she asked, searchingly.

And he answered, without a moment's hesitation, "Of course I do! There's no room for wishing about it—she *is* my wife. And what's more, she will know as soon as she gets my letter that I expect her to come back to me—at once." After a minute he asked again: "But is she really at Appledean?"

"Oh, yes, she's at Appledean. I believe her——" She hurriedly altered the word she was instinctively going to use for another word. "I believe he's away," she said.

"Away?" There came a note of great relief in Robert Singleton's voice.

"He's a good deal away." Something prompted Louisa to say those words—those words which she knew were more or less lying words. "He's engaged on some kind of Secret Service job. Last time I saw her he was just going to Holland. When he's away, she always goes down to Appledean. His people live in the same part of the world."

And then, all at once, in a very low, troubled, hesitating voice, Robert asked his sister a question: "What d'you think I'd better do, Louisa?" And, as she looked at him questioningly, he went on: "I mean about getting her back. What would you advise?"

"I think," she said pitifully, "that you'd better give me the letter you've written to her, and let *me* go down to-morrow morning to Appledean. But, oh, Robert, are you quite, quite sure that you want her to come back?"

"By God!" he exclaimed. "Why d'you ask me that again? I've answered it once. Am I a Christian man, or am I not? D'you want to drive me quite mad?"

And then, when he saw the look of suffering which came into her strained, thin face, he said quietly, "You must forgive me, my dear, for speaking like that, but I've had enough trouble to-day to turn any man into a brute. Even now I don't really understand——" He pushed the hair off his forehead with a weary, bewildered gesture. "You say she's only known him a little while—you say it only happened a little while ago?"

She nodded—telling herself that six or seven months *is* a little while in a grown-up woman's existence.

And then Robert went on, speaking as if to himself: "It was always easy, *much* too easy, to persuade her to do anything for any one for whom she was sorry. I expect it was something of that sort which happened. But she'll forget this dreadful time, poor little thing. We'll both forget it. It will have been such a little part of her life——"

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"Yes," said Louisa, "quite a little part of her life—that's true, Robert."

He got up. "I think I'll get out of doors," he muttered. "I might go for a walk round the park."

He walked to the door, and then he turned and came back, close to where she was standing. "You do think it will be all right about Lilla?" he asked. "She was always such a good girl, so—so religious. Somehow I can't believe it's true. I suppose you're *quite* sure, Louisa?"

And as she whispered "Yes," her throat strangled with sobs, he went on: "I think I must be going mad—as if you would have told me such a thing, if it wasn't true!" Louisa made a great effort over herself.

"I think it *will* be all right, Robert; but, as you said just now, both you and Lilla will have to forget—and it won't always be easy."

She was not thinking of Robert as she spoke, but it was her true love for her brother which prompted her to say something she had never thought to say to any human being: "I have had to forget many things about my dear Philip," she said, painfully. And Robert put his arms round her neck and kissed her. Somehow her words comforted him. "I've always known that, old girl," he muttered.

As they both moved towards the door, there came the sound of heavy footsteps galloping down the stairs. It was their mother's stout, elderly maid, Robey. She was panting, almost inarticulate with fright and agitation. "Oh, sir—oh, ma'am—it's Mrs. Singleton! She's slipped right down on the floor—she's very bad. But I don't think she's dead yet. We must send at once for the doctor."

CHAPTER XV

LOUISA LARK-WRIGHT was the most positive, the most practical of human beings, and yet the journey she took the next morning from London to Appledean passed like a strange, unreal dream.

Her husband had brought her to the station, and when saying good-bye—though they were only parting for a few hours—he had shown, as was his way, when moved, a good deal of emotion.

To Philip the death of Louisa's mother meant relief from ignoble, carking care; and it was to his credit that he managed to hide so completely the relief, nay, the joy, which filled a part of him—the selfish, secret part of him—this morning. But, thanks to his temperament, that artistic temperament which the Singletons had always despised, he was able to throw himself heart and soul into his wife's pain and distress.

As for Robert, frankly Philip could not face the thought of Robert, and of Robert's unmerited misfortunes!

And Louisa herself? Louisa had been deeply touched by Philip's exuberant sympathy. Instead of snubbing him, as she almost always did, she had welcomed his demonstrative, affectionate farewell, and had returned his kiss with warmth. He had made her travel first-class to-day, paying for the ticket out of his own money.

During those two hours when she had been quite alone on the journey to Appledean, Louisa had had time for much sad and anxious thought. Neither she nor Philip knew much about the marriage laws of their country, or whether those laws made any provision for such a strange and terrible case. Was the fact that Robert had been officially pronounced dead equivalent to a divorce, or was Lilla still in very fact his wife—in the same sense that she had been his wife when he went away?

With a sinking heart Louisa remembered the fierce, resolute way in which Robert had turned on her when she had asked him, for the second time, that searching question, as to whether he really desired Lilla's return. It had evidently never occurred to him that Lilla would have a say in the matter. She was his wife, and whatever she had done or not done, the decision rested with him—such was his point of view. And Louisa was well aware that it would have been the point of view of a very different person to Robert—that is, of their mother.

And yet in these days the last word does, after all, remain with the woman rather than with the man! No power on earth can force a wife to return to her husband if she be determined not to do so.

Louisa Lark-Wright's heart ached for Lilla. Whatever Lilla decided to do, there was deep distress and pain in front of her. Lilla was not a woman to do the selfish thing and rejoice in it—still less to do what she thought wrong, and then try to prove it right.

Louisa had remained sufficiently a Singleton to suppose that the more exciting and explosive manifestations of love are far more often seen among artists and writers than among ordinary, respectable people. But this morning she recalled what she herself had gone through when her engagement to Philip had first been forbidden by her parents. And especially she remembered a certain afternoon when she had gone up to her bedroom and lain on the floor, in a stupor of rage, of misery, and of rebellion—she, a grown-up woman of twenty-six!

And yet when, by dint of sullen determination, and backed up by her kind brother, Robert, she had had her wish, she had not been really happy. Almost from the first she had been acutely, often perhaps unreasonably, jealous of her attractive, volatile Philip—jealous of his models, and violently jealous, on at least two occasions, of his sitters. But pride, a great feeling of personal dignity, a certain hard good sense, as well as a determination to make a success of her odd marriage, had helped her through.

It was half-past twelve when she reached the tiny country station of Appledean, and one of the porters told her that Appledean House was not very far, only a little over a mile. So she started off down the white country road, feeling very tired, and also very hungry. She had been quite unable to eat last night, and this morning she had only had a cup of strong tea.

As usual, Louisa was unsuitably dressed. There was a burst of very hot weather just now, such as often comes in the end of May, but she was still wearing a thick black coat and skirt over a grey silk blouse.

Appledean Park? The name of Lilla's early home—for such all the Singletons considered it—was familiar to Mrs. Lark-Wright. And now, while trudging along the road, she remembered that it was there that her brother and Lilla had spent their honeymoon. It was she who had written and addressed there the telegram which had brought them hurrying home to Number 19.

She recalled how hard she had tried to prevent the sending of that telegram. She had thought it so cruel of her mother to disturb poor Robert on his honeymoon, but Mrs. Singleton—backed up, as usual, by Jenny—had insisted.

A mile is a very long way to walk if one is tired, and Louisa began to wish she had allowed Philip to come with her, as he had wanted to do. He would certainly have insisted on procuring some kind of carriage at the station. Also, he would have enjoyed seeing this beautiful country, the fine stretch of Sussex downs which rose up against the horizon to her right.

The thought of the interview which she believed now lay immediately before her began to make poor Louisa faint with fear. She uneasily asked herself whether she might venture to ask for Mrs. Gasparin. On the occasion of Lilla's first marriage George Gasparin had given the bride away, and Mrs. Lark-Wright remembered him as a very good-looking man; of his wife she had only a vague knowledge, and since Robert's marriage she had seen her but once. They had met at Number 19 one afternoon some four years ago, when Lilla was going out to spend the afternoon and evening with her cousin. She, Louisa, had thought Mrs. Gasparin supercilious, and very much the fine lady that day.

No, on the whole she thought she would ask for Lilla at once, and get it over. She had provided herself with a list of trains back; there was one in an hour and a half. If everything went as she hoped, she could easily catch it.

Though she felt hungry, she also felt as if food would choke her. Of course they would offer her lunch, but she made up her mind that she would come straight back to the little station, and, going into the public-house close by, eat a piece of bread and cheese. It would be foolish to go through the day without *any* food. To do so would only make her unfit for the painful evening which lay before her on her return to London.

At last she came up to some great iron and gilt gates. Could this be Appledean Park? Yes, it must be.

Louisa Lark-Wright was impressed, almost against her will.

The gates stood ajar, and so she walked through them and so on past the lodge, till a sudden turn showed her the noble front of the old house.

Louisa was still sufficiently a Singleton to feel a touch of involuntary respect for the power and the wealth Appledean implied in its fortunate possessors. She had not realised that Lilla's "grand relations" were quite as grand as this.

She walked across a vast gravelled space to the front door, and rang the bell. Then as the moments went by, she began to grow very nervous, to steel herself for what she knew would be to her a terrible ordeal. Louisa loved Lilla. She had kept up with her sister-in-law even since her second marriage, and she actually cared more for her now that she had done in the old days at Number 19.

At last the door opened, and a very old man-servant stood awaiting her pleasure.

"Can I see Mrs.——" she nearly uttered the name "Singleton." But, hurriedly correcting herself, she said, "Mrs. Carteret? I believe she is staying here."

"We expect Mrs. Carteret to-night, ma'am. She has been staying the last few days with Mr. Carteret's mother at Baycombe, some two miles from here. Would you like to see Mrs. Gasparin? She isn't very well to-day, so she hasn't gone in to the Sanchester hospital."

With a strange feeling of mingled regret and relief, Louisa said "Yes," she would see Mrs. Gasparin.

She followed the old man through the spacious, silent house, and at the end of the broad corridor he turned to her, "What name shall I say, ma'am?"

She answered briefly, "Mrs. Lark-Wright."

He opened a door, and she found herself in Mabel Gasparin's presence.

And then something odd and quite unexpected happened. As Mrs. Gasparin looked with surprise at the tired, worried-looking woman who had suddenly been thrust into her presence, she saw a sudden pallor come over the face of her unremembered visitor.

Walking quickly forward, she said kindly, "I'm afraid you don't feel well," and with concern she noted the deep mourning the other was wearing.

"Please forgive me. I'm not ill, I'm only tired."

Mrs. Lark-Wright looked round as if seeking support, and then she sank down into a chair, close to the door she had just come through. "Please forgive me," she said again, confusedly, "but I've come down from London to see Lilla, my sister-in-law. My mother died last night, and I never went to bed at all, so I'm very tired."

"Wait a moment—I'm going to get you a glass of wine——"

Mrs. Gasparin flung open the door, and a moment later she was back again with a glass of port already poured out, and a biscuit. "I remember you now," she said quickly. "We met once in FitzClarence Crescent—years ago. I'm so sorry to hear this about your mother. It was very good of you to come down like this—but Lilla Carteret isn't here. Still, she's not far away; I'll send for her after lunch."

To herself she was saying, "What an extraordinary thing to do! As if Lilla could possibly mind as much as all that!" And then, "Can Lilla have been left any money—a really large sum of money—by that hateful old woman? But no, that surely isn't at all likely!"

She waited a few moments, and then moved towards the bell. "I'll send Lilla a note," she said.

But the other put her hand up, and shook her head. "No," she spoke with difficulty, "no, don't do that yet—not till I've told you why I've come."

She was feeling better now, far better—well enough to be bitterly ashamed of this sudden, mysterious failure of nerve and of self-command. Her opinion of Mrs. Gasparin had changed, and she told herself that the woman now with her was a very kind woman. There was not a trace of the fine-ladyism about her which she, Louisa, thought she remembered. It would be an infinite comfort to be able to share her dreadful news with this kindly, capable looking Mrs. Gasparin.

And Mabel Gasparin?

Mabel Gasparin will always remember, though she has never told any one, not even George, how a most extraordinary feeling of terror, a prevision of coming misfortune, swept over her as she heard the faltering words.

"I've come down to tell Lilla something which I fear will make her very unhappy."

"Oh! Mrs. Lark-Wright! You don't mean that anything's happened to Dare Carteret?"

But somehow Mabel was not surprised when she saw the other shake her head.

"No, no! I don't even know him—I've never seen him!"

"Oh, well, then nothing else matters,—or is likely to matter,—to Lilla!"

And then, getting up, poor Louisa spoke out the truth, just as she had done the day before to her brother. Speaking as if what she was saying were the most natural thing in the world, she said quietly, "My brother, Robert, has come back."

Mabel Gasparin leant forward. "I don't understand what you mean——"

And she was indeed hoping—hoping—hoping that she had not heard the words aright.

"My brother was not killed. It was all a mistake. He has been in Belgium the whole time, behind the German lines. He came back yesterday. He got through to Holland on Wednesday—and he's at home now, in FitzClarence Crescent."

In a curiously toneless voice Mrs. Gasparin asked the question, "And you thought you ought to come down and tell Lilla?"

The other nodded. "I've brought her a letter from him. Of course he doesn't realise—he thinks her remarriage was all a mistake: as a matter of fact he wrote the letter before he knew. But I thought it best to bring it, all the same."

Mrs. Gasparin put out her hand, blindly, and held on to the mantelpiece. She had not known that there was anything in the world, apart from George and the boys, which could hurt her as she was being hurt now.

Large, reluctant tears forced themselves into her eyes. She gripped the mantelpiece tighter and tighter.

"And does your brother know now," she said, "about Lilla and Dare Carteret? Does he understand how they love one another?"

Yet she knew it was a futile and a cruel question to ask.

"He only knows of their marriage. But of course he doesn't really understand—and I hope, Mrs. Gasparin, that he never will."

"Then he means to get her back?"

"He certainly doesn't mean to give her up," said Louisa Lark-Wright, slowly. And then, in a sudden passion of woe, she cried out, "Oh, Mrs. Gasparin, don't look at me like that! Even *you* would be sorry for Robert if you could see him now! He looks an old and broken man,—yet he's only forty-three. Think of what he's come back to! It isn't only this—this frightful thing about Lilla—it's also the awful disgrace—the disgrace about our family business. That alone was enough to break his heart!"

"Yes," murmured the other, "I'd forgotten about that. I *am* sorry for him—indeed, indeed I am."

"I suppose," said Louisa Lark-Wright suddenly, "that it would be asking too much to ask *you* to tell Lilla, Mrs. Gasparin?"

The other waited so long before answering that Mrs. Lark-Wright began to wonder whether she had heard. But at last she answered.

"I think we both want to do the best for Lilla," she said, slowly. "And the best thing we can do for Lilla is first to tell Mr. Carteret's mother, with whom she is now staying. Lilla loves her dearly. Thank God he's away,—till to-morrow or Monday."

CHAPTER XVI

MABEL rang the bell. There followed a long, painful pause, and both felt relieved when the old butler, who had been pensioned over ten years ago, and who had rather reluctantly come back, "for the time of the war," shambled into the room.

"Will you please order the car to come round at once? I want a note taken to Mrs. Darrell Carteret, and then the car will take her on to Sanchester, and wait for her there."

She turned to Mrs. Lark-Wright. "I shall arrange for Lilla to take my place at the hospital this afternoon," she said. "And then, while she is there, I will tell Mrs. Carteret what has happened, and discuss with her what had best be done. Perhaps you would prefer to stay here till something is settled. I suppose there's no necessity that you should go back to town—even to-night?"

Poor Louisa looked at her determined-looking, now white-faced hostess uncertainly. She was still sufficiently a Singleton to dislike taking any decision in a hurry. But everything had fallen out so differently from what she had expected! She had meant to have a short, if a painful, interview with Lilla, and then go back straight to London.

But now she saw there was a great deal to be said for Mrs. Gasparin's suggestion. It would be dreadful to go back and tell Robert that she had not even seen Lilla. Also, she realised that she owed real gratitude to the woman who was standing there before her, making kind and wise arrangements with so much quick, intelligent decision, and that though she looked as if it was she herself who had received a stunning blow from fate.

It was strange how fond Lilla managed to make people of her! If one cared at all for the poor little thing, one cared so much—even Louisa felt that. She was quite as sorry for Lilla as for Robert,—now. As for Darrell Carteret, the third in the dreadful problem, he was, to Louisa Lark-Wright, an abstraction. She did not think of him, or of his part in the matter at all.

And so at last she answered, not very graciously, for it was not her way to be gracious, "Yes, I suppose I could stay here, if necessary, till to-morrow. Of course it would be very unsatisfactory to have to go back and tell Robert that—that nothing was settled."

The other nodded her head quickly.

"If you will allow it, Mrs. Lark-Wright, I should like to make a suggestion. That is that you go upstairs, undress, and go to bed! I have a delightful, cheerful room all ready——" She checked herself, overcome with the thought that that room she was now offering to this unwelcome guest had been prepared for Lilla, who was to have come over to Appledean for the night.

She went on: "If you will get into bed, my maid shall bring you up a little luncheon on a tray. And then, if you can possibly manage it, I should, if I were you, try and have a good long sleep! I don't expect to be back for a long time—for several hours, in fact—for I shall stay and see Lilla, unless, of course, Mrs. Carteret thinks I had better not do so. I shall leave everything to her. She's a very wise, as well as a very good, woman. Also, she's almost as fond of Lilla as she is of her own son."

Louisa got up. "You're very kind," she murmured. "Yes, I think I will do just as you suggest." Then she added, in an awkward tone, "I suppose this lady—the lady you're going to see—is sure to think Lilla *ought* to go back to my brother? Perhaps I ought to tell you, before you see Lilla, that my brother spoke to me as if anything in the way of divorce was quite out of the question. To him, poor fellow, Lilla *is* his wife——"

"Yes, I quite understand that," Mrs. Gasparin answered in a dry, hard voice. "And if it is any consolation to you, I think I may tell you that Mrs. Carteret—the lady I'm going to see—will probably look at the matter in exactly the same light as does your brother. She's a devout Roman Catholic, and Catholics don't believe in divorce. *I* do—especially in a case like this."

Louisa Lark-Wright felt immensely relieved. "Of course—I'd forgotten Mr. Carteret was a Roman Catholic, and that they were married in a Roman church." She added, "I remember how much the fact distressed my poor mother. Still it does simplify things, doesn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose it does," said Mabel Gasparin, slowly.

Twenty minutes later Mrs. Gasparin went to the telephone. "Has Lilla gone yet?" she called out. She heard Mrs. Carteret's voice at the other end, and there came the answer she at once wished and dreaded to hear, "Oh, yes, she went off at once; and she told me to tell you to be quite happy about it all. She can stay as long at the hospital as you want her to stay."

And then Mrs. Gasparin said, "I'm coming to see you, and I wanted Lilla to be out of the way." Quickly she added, "Dare's all right—it's nothing to do with Dare."

Then, for the tears began rolling down her cheeks as she uttered those words at once so lying and so true, she hung up the receiver, and walked out of the house without saying where she was going—for she did not want to be interrupted during the dreadful task which lay before her.

She went along slowly, slowly, for why hurry—as some folks hurry—to tell bad news? In the pocket of her coat was Robert Singleton's letter to his wife. She would have given the world to feel able to take it out, tear it in a thousand bits, and scatter the bits over the wind-blown down.

After she had walked nearly a mile—that is, half-way to Baycombe—Mabel Gasparin sank down on to the short turf, and, covering her face with her hands, burst into bitter sobs.

It is an awful thing to be the harbinger of woe, of misfortune, of disgrace, and that even if the harbinger cares little or nothing for those on whom he or she pays the call of sorrow. But in this case Mabel loved Lilla with a peculiar, tender, protecting love. She had also always had a curious, rather pathetic pride in the lovely, soft whiteness of poor little Lilla's ermine, and that although in old days, when her friend was leading that dreary life in FitzClarence Crescent, Mabel had sometimes felt a little impatient of Lilla's goodness and submissiveness.

Often she had secretly wondered that a woman she divined to be capable of deep, passionate feeling, should put up so tamely, so meekly, with the joyless life which kindly, but, in Mabel's eyes, intolerably dull and unimaginative Robert Singleton imposed upon his wife. And during these last few months, Mabel, herself so full of unceasing anxiety and unease, had rejoiced, with a touching depth of selfless joy, in Lilla's wonderful happiness.

It had pleased her to think: "Some day, when we are both old women, I shall say to Lilla, 'Darling, you've owed all your happiness to me! You would never have met your Dare if I hadn't done something which cost me a great deal at the time I did it. . . . Dare Carteret was then associated in my mind with the one thing in my life which had humiliated me, and which I wished to forget. So when Dare came and asked George to let him Baycombe Cottage for his mother, I was sorely tempted to make George say 'No.' And then I bethought myself that to do that would be not only selfish but ignoble. Dare Carteret had been very good to me, during those dreadful weeks in Egypt years ago. Ought I to punish him now because of what I myself had done long ago? And so I conquered the impulse, and twice I was richly blessed—firstly, in the friendship of dear Mrs. Carteret (and her friendship has meant much to me), but far, far more in your happiness, my darling Lilla!' "

And now she would never be able to say that. The secret knowledge which had brought her joy must henceforth bring her pain, for if she had followed her first impulse, if Mrs. Carteret had never come to Baycombe, then Lilla and Carteret would never have met.

She got up slowly, dried her eyes, and began walking again—while her mind turned to face the terrible problem which was so oppressing her heart, first this way and then that.

She knew, only too well, that there could be no doubt as to what Mrs. Carteret would think it right for Lilla to do. But there was the possibility that what Mrs. Carteret thought would not influence, when it came to the point, either Carteret or Lilla.

Were they two to make up their minds to brave what Carteret, at any rate, would probably describe as conventional morality, they would have plenty of sympathisers, and that even if Robert Singleton persisted in his present intention of never divorcing his wife.

But would they be happy? Mrs. Gasparin, all unconsciously, shook her head. Neither would ever be simply, naturally, joyously happy again. And of the two, the one for whom she, Mabel, cared so deeply, would be the least happy. Lilla had a sensitive conscience, as well as a very high sense of duty. The fact that Robert, miserable, lonely, unconsoled—he was not the man to console himself—was somewhere in the world, a victim immolated to her passion for another man, would haunt Lilla, unceasingly.

It was an hour later, and Mabel Gasparin had told Mrs. Carteret that which she had come to tell.

She was still standing, with her face to the light, in the little drawing-room of Baycombe Cottage, for she had not sat down at all, and she still felt as if there would ever sound in her ears the quiet words Mrs. Carteret had uttered when told, with merciful baldness, the truth: "I would rather—far rather, Mrs. Gasparin, have heard that my boy was dead."

And yet Carteret's mother had so far said very little. But the one or two things she had said showed how terribly she was moved—how completely she realised the depth of the trouble an untoward fate had brought on the two hapless people who were all her world.

"May there not be some way out?" asked Mabel at last.

And Mrs. Carteret from her sofa looked up at her visitor fixedly.

"There is no way," she said painfully, "that I can see, excepting the straight way. Lilla would be lost in a crooked way."

There was again one of those long silences of which their interview seemed chiefly composed, but at last Mrs. Carteret again spoke, and her words took the younger woman by surprise.

"I want you to tell me," she said, "what sort of a man is this Robert Singleton? I have formed a certain opinion of him, for Lilla, last autumn, in that week she spent here before——" and then she checked herself, and after a moment went on: "Lilla told me a good deal about him. But I should like also to have *your* opinion."

And Mrs. Gasparin, wondering at the question, began falteringly, "Robert Singleton is a very unimaginative, rather pompous man—not pompous in manner, for he's rather jovial and easy-going in manner, but—well, you will know, I think, what I mean——"

And Mrs. Carteret said quickly, "Yes, I think I know what you mean. He's obviously the product of a pompous and conventional environment. But he is, I suppose, my dear, what people call a good and upright man?"

And Mabel reluctantly answered, "Yes. He's all that—even something more. When they used to come and stay with us, Robert always went to church on Sunday—whatever the other people in the house did, Robert always went to church."

"And I suppose there can be no doubt," asked Mrs. Carteret, but her voice sank a little as she spoke, "that he was—and is—very, very fond of Lilla?"

And Mabel answered, again reluctantly, "Yes, unfortunately he was—and is—very, very fond of her."

And then there came a sudden change in the face of the old woman who was looking up at her. It became suffused with a peculiar kind of glow, of radiance. "Don't say 'unfortunately,'" she exclaimed. "Love is never lost—love, my dear, even selfish love, suffereth long and is kind. To save her from disaster, Lilla will need much kindness and—and patience from this unfortunate man."

"I suppose you have no doubt at all as to Lilla's decision?" asked Mrs. Gasparin slowly.

Mrs. Carteret at once answered, "I can only see one decision open to her."

Mabel Gasparin cried out, almost violently: "Can't you? I know what would be *my* decision in such a case. And oh, Mrs. Carteret, I cannot help hoping that Lilla will decide to do what you think wrong!"

"My dear child, you would not wish that for long." She passed over the challenge implied in the other's words.

"If only Lilla were less good," wailed Mabel. She was crying now.

"It is not entirely a question of goodness," said Mrs. Carteret in a low voice, "it is also a question of kindness and of mercy. From what you tell me now, and also from what I remember being told last autumn, this unfortunate Robert Singleton has been very much tried by God——"

And to that there was no answer.

"But what is to be done now? Who is to tell her?" asked Mabel Gasparin, at last.

Mrs. Carteret answered slowly, "I will tell her, if you will telephone and ask her to come back at the end of an hour from now. And then, before you go away, I want you to help me to get up. I wish to go into the chapel. If I call my poor old Josephine, she will see in a moment that there is something wrong. I wonder——" and for the first time there came a look of indecision on her face—"I wonder if we could get rid of Josephine for the rest of to-day?"

Mrs. Gasparin said quickly, "Of course we can! The car can take her over to Appledean. She always enjoys a chat in the housekeeper's room. I'll also telephone home, and say that she's coming."

When they were well within the yew hedges leading to the door of the monastery chapel, Mrs. Carteret turned and said, "I want to impose still further on your kindness, my dear. I may have to go up to London to-night; I may have to see this man, Robert Singleton——"

Mrs. Gasparin was almost too surprised to speak.

"Certainly," she murmured, "I—I'll come, of course, and drive you to the station. I could arrange to travel up with you, if you like."

"No, I prefer to go alone. Besides, by that time—if things go as I think they will—Lilla will be glad to have you with her. She mustn't spend the night alone.

But one other thing you could do for me. Telephone, after you get home, to Dare's house in Westminster, and tell his servants that I may be sleeping there to-night."

And then, after she had actually opened the chapel door, Mabel Gasparin said something to which later she looked back with unavailing regret.

"Dear Mrs. Carteret," she exclaimed, "we have not yet said one word of Dare!"

There passed over the face of Carteret's mother a look of anguish. "If you don't mind, dear child, we will not speak of Dare to-day," she said gently.

And poor Mabel Gasparin muttered, "I beg your pardon"—and as she watched her old friend go through into the chapel, and as she heard the uneven tap-tap of the two walking-sticks on the pavement of the central aisle, she felt she would give years of her life to recall, to blot out, those impulsive words.

And then suddenly she heard herself called by the only name by which so far Mrs. Carteret had ever called her, and she was startled, for she knew that Catholics never speak aloud in a church. "Mrs. Gasparin? Mrs. Gasparin? Will you kindly come here a moment?"

She went quickly up to where Mrs. Carteret was standing before the altar.

"I want to thank you, my dear, for your thoughtful kindness to me to-day, and to tell you that henceforth, whenever I pray for Lilla,"—she waited for a moment, and then added, with an effort, "and for my boy, I shall also always pray for you and for those you love."

Ten minutes later, one of the lay brothers who had come into the chapel for a mouthful of prayers (he was an Irishman, not a Frenchman), rose and opened the door to let Mrs. Carteret out.

To his surprise, she asked him to accompany her to the gate which commanded the high road from Sanchester, and there she kept him for a few moments with her, while she talked to him of something to which Brother Terence never gave very much thought, for he was a cheerful, positive soul.

That something was the life beyond the grave.

And he said to her at last, a little uncomfortably, "Ah, now, Mrs. Carteret, ye mustn't be thinking of death just yet!"

She answered, very gently, "Dear Brother Terence, there are times when it brings comfort to think, not of death, but of heaven, and of how different certain conditions will be in heaven from what they are in this, our life." Then, for her ears had caught the sound of a motor, she added, "Now leave me, and begin again the prayers that I interrupted. And don't forget, Brother Terence, to say a very fervent prayer for my intention. Although I'm only an old woman, I need all the prayers I can get, just now."

And, wondering, he turned obediently and left her. He feared the poor lady was suffering more pain than usual, and he told himself pitifully that she, at any rate, was having her purgatory on this earth.

CHAPTER XVII

WHEN Lilla saw Mrs. Carteret standing by the gate of Baycombe Cottage, there swept over her a slight wave of apprehension.

Though she tried hard to keep such fears and tremors in leash, Lilla was always acutely anxious while she believed Carteret to be either on his way to the Continent, or on his passage back. Only the day before, a Dutch packet had been sunk by a German submarine without warning, and half of the passengers had been drowned. But she knew now that her husband was not due back from Holland till at earliest to-morrow morning.

Even so, she jumped out of the car and came forward very quickly, asking, in a tone which she tried to make natural, "Have you had any news of Dare, Mum?" And she felt extraordinarily relieved when the other shook her head.

And then again there came over Lilla a hidden wave of apprehension, for Mrs. Carteret, standing there, on the little path, and gazing smilelessly into her face, looked much more ill and suffering than usual.

They passed slowly through the open door, and so into the little square sitting-room, of which nearly a third of the space was taken up by Mrs. Carteret's broad, high couch. One peculiarity of her ailment was that, while feeling comparatively comfortable if she stood upright, or if she lay down, she could not sit straight up with any ease.

On such occasions as this, when the mistress of Baycombe Cottage had been out of doors, or in the monastery chapel, the old French servant would almost always bustle in and help her on to her couch. But today there reigned an ominous silence over the little house, and Mrs. Carteret, when in her sitting-room, went on standing.

All at once Lilla saw on the polished surface of the old-fashioned rosewood table a square envelope, and at that same moment Mrs. Carteret spoke.

"Lilla!" The name was uttered with difficulty, in an almost inaudible voice. "Lilla, my child—that letter is for you. Do you recognise the handwriting?"

And Lilla, instead of taking it up, bent forward, and looked intently at the now unfamiliar name which had been hers so long. Then she straightened herself, and looked round—was it with a touch of defiance?—at her husband's mother. "It's very like a handwriting I once knew," she said quietly. "But of course I know it can't be that."

But Mrs. Carteret said, "Yes, Lilla. It is the handwriting you once knew——" she stopped, took a long breath, then went on steadily—"for it's Robert Singleton's handwriting. He is alive, after having been hidden in Belgium for nearly two years. He came back to London this morning, and one of his sisters is at Appledean now. It was she who brought down this letter."

Then, hardly knowing what she was doing, she sat down, with a painful, awkward movement, on her couch. And Lilla rushed forward—"Oh, Mum," she cried. "Let me help you! You know you mustn't do that!"

And Mrs. Carteret allowed herself to be stretched out, and made—Heaven save the mark!—"comfortable." She knew that she was only at the beginning of anguish, and yet she felt that nothing could ever be as bad again as these two or three moments she had just gone through.

Neither spoke for a little while. And then Lilla asked, very quietly, "Do you think I ought to read that letter now?" And Mrs. Carteret answered, "I will read it to you, if you like, my dear."

But Lilla shook her head. "No," she said, "I think I'll take it away to my own room, and read it there."

And then she sank down on her knees and laid her soft cheek against Mrs. Carteret's frail, thin, bony hand. In her heart she was saying, "Don't be too unhappy, Mum! Why should more people be unhappy than can be helped? But her lips did not utter out loud the words she said in her heart, for it was as if they were strangled in her throat. She wondered if that horrible, constricted feeling would ever leave her,—if she would ever be able to speak naturally again. But perhaps it was as well that she had that queer sensation, for she wanted dreadfully to scream. . . .

Presently she got up, and going out quietly, shut the door.

Mrs. Carteret, listening, heard her, when alone in the passage, open the envelope and take the letter out. Then, after a few moments, Lilla went up the steep staircase and so into the front one of the two rooms which the mistress of Baycombe Cottage had had prepared, with such happy, loving care for the week-end visits of her son and of her son's wife.

They had come down for almost every week-end since their marriage, and quite often—perhaps once in every three weeks—Carteret had unselfishly insisted that his wife should stay behind him for Sunday night, sometimes even for Monday night as well. And those had been very peaceful little times for Mrs. Carteret and Lilla.

And now, as Mrs. Carteret lay there, she could hear Lilla, restlessly passing from one room to the other, moving much as does some wild creature of the woods when it has been suddenly trapped and imprisoned in a small place.

As the moments dragged slowly by, and those sounds of swift, aimless comings and goings went on overhead, the listener below grew more and more afraid. And at last, strong as was her self-control, she felt she could bear it no longer. So she took the stick which was always laid ready to her hand for the purpose, and tapped three times on the floor.

At once the sounds above stopped, and she heard Lilla's light footsteps running down the staircase.

The door opened. "Yes? If there anything I can do for you? I'm sorry I left you alone so long, Mum. Forgive me," said the gentle, eager voice, but Mrs. Carteret, looking at her mutely, saw that Lilla's face was as if all the healthy natural colour had been drained from it. But her eyes were dry and bright, and in her hand she still held, open, Robert Singleton's letter.

And then Mrs. Carteret said feebly, "I want you to give me eight drops out of a bottle you will find in the corner cupboard over there."

On her way to the cupboard where Mrs. Carteret's medicine was kept, Lilla laid down the letter, open, on

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the table. Then she went and poured out the measured drops in a little wine-glass full of water. Coming back, she waited, standing by the couch, till Mrs. Carteret had finished.

When she had taken back the empty glass, she said, in that unnaturally placid, gentle voice, and with her eyes still clear, still bright, though perhaps more fixed than usual, "Shall I read you Robert's letter, Mum?" But Mrs. Carteret shook her head—"No, I would rather read it myself, if you wish me to read it all. But if you would like me only to hear a part of it,—then, my dear, I will ask you to read me that part."

But Lilla said at once, "I want you to read it all."

And while it was being read by Dare's mother, the owner of the letter stared before her, gazing abstractedly out of the window, waiting patiently.

At last Mrs. Carteret looked up. "I'm quite sure that when he wrote this, Mr. Singleton knew nothing of what has happened." And then, making a great effort, she said, "Lilla? It's the letter of a good man—and of a man who cares for you very deeply."

Lilla answered at once, "Yes—yes. He does." And the poor soul went on, as if she was speaking to herself: "But you see, do what I can, I can't *think* of him as anything but dead. To me Robert *is* dead. And the strange thing about it, to me, is that getting that letter has made me feel as if I were dead too—" And then she asked plaintively, "I suppose Mabel knows? Poor Mabel! She'll mind very much." Then again she said, "Every one knows, I suppose, except Dare? But perhaps Dare will never know—perhaps God will be kind—perhaps Dare will be drowned on his way back from Holland. You wouldn't mind much, would you, Mum?"

And Mrs. Carteret said in a low voice, "No, Lilla, I shouldn't mind at all——"

"Because, you see," Lilla went on, in that impersonal, argumentative tone, "he would have been quite happy till he died. I'd like you to see a bit of the letter I got this morning. It came in what they call 'the bag,' so of course it wasn't censored."

She took a packet of foreign note-paper out of the bosom of her blouse, and, choosing one sheet, placed it in the other's stiff fingers. So Mrs. Carteret read, for the first time, a part of one of her son's daily letters to Lilla.

"I came across this little poem in a volume of verse by a man named Gibson. Queer, isn't it, that a fellow one's never seen and never will see, puts down on a bit of paper exactly what one would put down oneself —if only one could? It's called 'Marriage':

"Going my way of old,
Contented more or less,
I dreamt not life could hold
Such happiness.

"I dreamt not that love's way
Could keep the golden height
Day after happy day,
Night after night."

She waited till Mrs. Carteret motioned her to take the sheet away, then she said wistfully, "You see I *have* made him happy, Mum,—almost as happy as he —has—made—me."

And then, in a low, trembling voice, she said what Mrs. Carteret had been waiting for, and dreading: "I want you to tell me what I ought to do. I mean what it would be best for Dare that I should do?"

But the arbiter's heart failed her. She felt she could not assume the awful burden which was being put on her. "I think," she answered slowly, "that only your own conscience can tell you that, Lilla."

Lilla shook her head. "No, I want you to decide for me." But she went on, in a curious, questioning tone, "I suppose that no one can force me to leave Dare? No one can force me to go back to Robert?"

And then, suddenly overwhelmed by the vision her own question had conjured up, her strained, unnatural composure was shattered in pieces.

She sank down on the floor by Mrs. Carteret's side, and covered her face with her hands. "I can't do it," she wailed, "it's no good pretending that I can do it! When there came the sound of your stick on the floor I was trying to make up my mind to run away—now, this afternoon! To hide myself, where no one —neither Robert nor Dare—could ever find me!"

And then, as Mrs. Carteret remained silent, she said wistfully and oh! so sadly, "I suppose you think it would be impossible for me to do that?"

"I think," said Mrs. Carteret slowly, "that it could have only one end——"

"One end?" Lilla lifted her head, and fixed her wild, tear-filled eyes on Carteret's mother. "What end do you mean, Mum?"

"You would, of course, in time go back to Dare," said Mrs. Carteret in a low voice. "And then the best that could happen, in a worldly sense——" She stopped. Surely Lilla must understand what she meant?

But Lilla gazed at her with wide-open, perplexed eyes. "In a worldly sense?" she echoed doubtfully.

"Yes, my dear. In a worldly sense the best thing that could happen to you—and I suppose to Dare too—would be that Robert Singleton should divorce you. He says now that nothing would make him do such a thing, but men change in these matters——" She spoke a little wearily. She could not explain to Lilla her point of view, if Lilla in very truth did not understand it.

But Lilla did understand. She drew a long, struggling breath. "Ah!" she said. "But you do think it would be wicked, as well as horribly selfish, to make Robert do that."

Mrs. Carteret bent her head. "I am a Catholic," she said in a low, reluctant voice, "and I am bound to look at such conduct from a Catholic point of view."

And Lilla, as if arguing with herself, said, "Dare, too, is a Catholic. He always goes to church now." She added naïvely, "Even if I don't go with him."

And for the first time Mrs. Carteret's eyes filled and brimmed over with tears. She had not known that. Yesterday those few words of Lilla's would have made her so happy—would have seemed a direct answer to her prayers. But now, to-day, they seemed only to increase her anguish.

"There *is* another way," exclaimed Lilla suddenly, in a stifled tone. "I thought of that way, too, while I was upstairs."

Mrs. Carteret answered very firmly, "Yes, but it's the coward's way—not one that you, Lilla, or Dare, would ever really consider." She waited a few moments, and then she said slowly: "If you will give me and yourself a little time I think we might find a way, a middle course—especially, if your——" And then she stopped speaking abruptly.

"Yes?"

"Especially if Robert Singleton is the good man I take him to be."

Lilla got up. "I think I'll go out of doors for a little while," she said quietly.

CHAPTER XVIII

LILLA closed the door of the little sitting-room quietly behind her. And then she stood in the passage for a moment—irresolute. She was telling herself that before she left the house she must surely put on her hat—and yet she had a kind of sick horror of going again upstairs into a room where everything cried out to her of Dare. Then she put her hand to her head and found that she still was wearing the little motor bonnet in which she had driven to the hospital.

She opened the front door——

Mrs. Carteret, on her sofa, imagined Lilla going round the house, and so through the monastery grounds, on to the lonely downs. But Lilla went straight down the flagged path to the gate opening into the village street. She felt somehow that she could face her fearful trouble better walking on the peopled impersonal highway than across the wind-swept solitary uplands where every path held for her by now confidingly happy memories of eager, happy talk or comfortable silence, the time spent as often as not with Dare's arm round her shoulder, guiding her in the way he wished them to go.

She turned a little blindly to the left of the gate. At this time of the day the village street—it was really part of the old coaching road from London to Brighton—was singularly empty. Two or three children were playing outside the Post Office, but most of the women were at tea. It was a beautiful spring day, and a keen, delicate wind blew between the low houses. Already some of the cottage gardens were gay with brilliantly tinted flowers and fruit blossoms.

As she neared the end of the village she suddenly saw a pathetic figure—a young woman all in black, holding in her arms a baby, with black ribbon on the sleeves of its fat, mottled arms. This was a Baycombe war-widow, a young woman with the delicate, rather dreamy face which so many of her class have in that part of England. There was a look of settled resignation and sadness in her grey eyes, and Lilla, who had been poignantly sorry for her, felt she must stop and say a word or two—it would look strange if she hurried past without speaking. She slackened in her quick, mechanical walk, and swerved a little towards the gate. Twice she opened her lips, but no words came, for she had suddenly been seized with anguished jealousy of the woman who was standing there—within her arms the child of the man she was free to love, if so faithful was she, till death reunited them. Lilla felt that Mrs. Dean was to be envied—not pitied.

So she quickened her footsteps, and just waved her hand at the mother and child. Somehow she could not stop.

Soon passing out of the village, she found herself on the long stretch of road leading to Sanchester. And there for the first time she turned and looked up and down. To her great relief there was no one in sight, for the constant, cheerful pre-war coming and going along a thoroughfare linking an important market town and a cathedral city had vanished long ago.

West Sussex is an old-world, high-Tory stretch of southern England, and even quite early in the war all the men had volunteered, without stopping to think whether they could all be spared, and now, on either side of the road, the fields lay fallow, the hedges untrimmed, though all the more beautiful for that, in this burst of early summer weather.

Lilla, walking more and more slowly, at last came to a full stop, and, standing there, in the afternoon light, she faced the agonising problem which confronted her heart, her imagination, and her conscience. It was easier to her to do this in the open air, than in Mrs. Carteret's house, where everything spoke to her of Dare. . . .

Robert alive? Robert in active being—Robert still in his own narrow and obstinate if not unkindly mind, her unquestioned master, even if also her devoted husband. A certain sentence in his letter, though she had only read that letter once right through, was burnt into Lilla's brain—that sentence ran: "Darling, how I long to see my own dearest love."

Since the day she had left FitzClarence Crescent she had put much of the past determinedly behind her, but deep in her heart she knew that during that first year of widowhood she had not been able, nay, she had not even tried, to put away from her the memory of Robert. But it had been a Robert idealised and transfigured, as it were, by the circumstances of a glorious death on the field of battle. That death had seemed to pay for, and also to wipe out, all those years of idle ease, and of cowardly subservience to his tyrannical mother. In those now seemingly unreal days when Cecil Sturges, in his quiet, unobtrusive, sexless fashion had been pursuing her with his devotion, while unconsciously betraying how little this great war, which meant so much to her, a woman, meant to him—it had actually been a comfort to Lilla to feel that, even if she did marry Cecil, Robert in a sense would still be her husband—the other only a kindly comrade and friend.

Then love, that passion of whose very existence she had been fathomlessly unaware, had obliterated the drab past. What had brought her and Dare together had been something instinctive, overmastering, almost, looking back, she could say to herself, inevitable. Every fibre of her being, the very inner core of her, cried out for and clung to Darrell Carteret. But honour, and, yes, she knew it only too well, common humanity as well as duty, showed her only too clearly the hard way she was doomed to go. Nay, more, she realised now, with a terrible sense of startled surprise, that Robert Singleton had never become really dethroned in her imagination as her husband. She could not clearly say to herself, as so many women in her place would have clearly said to themselves, "Robert Singleton is no longer my husband—my husband is Dare Carteret."

During the months Lilla had spent in Allen's Munition Factory, she had come in contact with more than one of the degrading domestic tragedies which war brings always in its train—that of the soldier who, coming home, unexpectedly, on leave, finds another man installed in his bed, and at his board. In one such case as this she had been pained and shocked by the way in which two of the girls, themselves married, had discussed the story with her. "It's hard on him, poor chap," they had observed philosophically, "but after all she felt lonely-like.—'Tother chap was there, too, and always at her!" The fact that the injured husband had been a soldier, fighting for his country, had not seemed in the minds of these two young women to really affect the question at all, but to Lilla it had affected it most deeply. And yet now how she pitied, how she understood, the woman who drifts on to the unchartered sea of love, and who finds herself in the terrible position of having a husband and a lover, too.

She longed with an agonised longing to tear herself asunder—to give half of herself to the one, and half to the other. She knew right well that it was in her power to give that to Dare Carteret which Robert would never miss, for it would be coming from a Lilla Robert did not know. Robert, thank God, knew nothing of the other Lilla, of Dare's Lilla. He had never longed for, never wanted, more than she was able to yield. Obedience, gentleness, unselfishness were all he demanded, and the possession of these had made Lilla his ideal woman. She knew well enough that he had never been disappointed in her, save in that one matter of their having no child.

Perhaps because he himself gave so infinitely more, Dare at once demanded more, and exacted less. Her will, which had been so atrophied during those dreary years at FitzClarence Crescent, often flashed now into eager, assertive being, and there would sometimes

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come between herself and Dare a conflict in which she generally won. It had given her joy to test the depth, the selflessness, of his passion for her—and when it came to what was after all only a gossamer tug of war, it was he, not she, who would always give in. In a word, they were lovers, and the great strength of his love made him gentle and magnanimous with her.

Looking straight up into the May sky, her eyes suddenly brimmed over with tears. She was remembering what had happened just before they had parted three days ago. He had wanted her to stay in London, for it was not certain whether or not he was to be away four days, or five. And she had thought she ought to go down to Baycombe—as Mrs. Carteret was ailing more than usual. He had given in, with the words, half laughing, half reproachful: "Why, Lilla, I never thought to have a rival in my mother!" And then, when they had been saying good-bye, with her arms round his neck, she had whispered, "Oh, Dare, don't you know that I would much—much rather stay here and wait for you?"

Lilla, both as a girl and during her marriage to Robert Singleton, had been what in common parlance is known as a religious woman. Few indeed were the Sundays when she did not go to church at least once. She said her prayers honestly, soberly, devoutly, night and morning. For a while at least her faith had been vivified so far as to make her what Philip Lark-Wright had once described in the old days as "a little high." Then, under the strong pressure of the public opinion about her, and especially of Robert's half jealous suspicion of something in which he could have no share with her, she had slipped out of that phase. And now, lately, she had been too happy, too content, to be really touched, or affected even, by the atmosphere of deep spiritual faith in which she lived and had her being when at Baycombe.

Yet it affected her powerfully to-day, in this moment of terrible ordeal. And it was a very positive consolation, something to which she could cling, to know that not only Mrs. Carteret, but Dare himself, would acknowledge, and that however bitter his revolt, the claim on her conscience of a tie which civilised man has agreed to put on a higher plane than that of nature. Once, early in their acquaintance, Carteret had opened out to her his reserved, rebellious heart concerning the terrible disappointment he had encountered when, coming home to fight, he had not been allowed to carry through his purpose. He had told her how once there had been open to him a way of escape, the promise of the exertion of influence in a certain quarter which would have meant a commission in a famous Indian Regiment then on its way to Europe. He had taken two hours to consider his powerful friend's offer, and then—he had refused to avail himself of it.

He and Lilla had never spoken of the matter again, but Lilla, since their marriage, had often thought of it, and thanked God in her heart that Dare had had the courage to do what he had done. A less strong man, a man who saw the straight and desolate way of duty less clear, would have seized the opportunity, wronging deeply, not only himself and his country, but also a woman whom he did not then know.

Again and again Lilla had thought of those two hours in which she believed her fate, even more than Carteret's, to have been decided. Yes, in her innermost heart, Lilla now knew that, however terrible, strong, and passionate the revolt of the natural man, there was yet in the man she loved something which would understand and recognise her submission to what she believed to be right, rather than to what she knew to be wrong.

As she at last made her way back slowly, slowly to Baycombe Cottage, she began to lean her fainting spirit on the sensitive, understanding heart of the frail, ailing woman awaiting her there, on Mrs. Carteret as well as on that upright wall, studded so often with nails which point outwards, which some human beings call duty, others conscience, and some the will of God.

CHAPTER XIX

IT was late in the evening of the same day, a little after half-past eight, and Robert Singleton was sitting in the dining-room of Number 19. He had just come back there, after letting his friend, Cecil Sturges, out of the front door.

Sturges, after working at his own office all day long, now went off in the evening and spent some three hours, from nine to twelve, in another office. It seemed a very odd arrangement—but then so many things were odd now, so utterly unlike the state of things which Robert Singleton had left in England nearly two years ago!

Many amazing happenings had come to pass in the last twenty-four hours, and this seemed to be the first real breathing-space for thought or recollection he had had.

Last night, thanks in a great measure to that unfamiliar telephone being in the house, he and Louisa had had quite a procession of people—first, naturally, the doctor; then Mr. Boucher, Mrs. Singleton's old friend as well as lawyer; and after him, of course, Philip Lark-Wright, whom his wife had sent for almost at once, though in doing this she had not had either the consent or the approval of her brother. It was not that Robert disliked Philip exactly, but he thought him a poor creature, and on such a night as the night of his mother's death he had felt rather irritated at Philip's presence. Not but what poor

Philip had made himself useful in the running of errands, in the sending of telegrams, and so on.

Then, for Robert, had come a good long, dreamless night. It was strange that it had been so, but when he woke up in the morning, he had felt very much better, more able to face the extraordinary state of things to which he had come back.

Comparatively early too, to-day, there had come a message for him by telephone from Louisa, saying she was going down to Sussex, and that she would let him hear from her in the course of the day. But, as the day had gone on, he had not heard from Louisa, and all that had happened had been a telegram from Jenny to say that she was staying away yet another night.

Robert told himself sorely that Jenny would be dreadfully sorry and shocked to find that she had been amusing herself with a lot of strangers when her mother was lying dead. But still, her absence just now was a distinct relief.

As the afternoon had gone on, he had begun to feel worried and anxious at the continued absence of news from Louisa, but he comforted himself with the knowledge that soon she would be back. And it was just possible—although he confessed reluctantly to himself it was not very probable—that she would bring Lilla with her.

The day had been full of urgent business which had to be done; and with his mother's solicitor he had had a very startling and uncomfortable conversation. Mr. Boucher had broken to him the painful fact that in the new will Mrs. Singleton had made this last autumn, after the terrible Temple business, he, Robert, being of course supposed to be dead, was not mentioned.

The whole of Mrs. Singleton's large fortune had been divided between her two daughters, and in this last will she had also left a legacy of ten thousand pounds to Cecil Sturges.

The old lawyer had concluded by saying, "Of course I feel morally certain that it will be all right. Still, it's a queer case—one which will make an interesting precedent. However, I feel justified in telling you, my dear Robert, that the inconvenience is likely to be only temporary. The Court will certainly uphold your mother's former will. You see, it isn't as if there'll be any opposition. The only person who will suffer, in a serious sense, will be Cecil Sturges."

"But I won't let Sturges suffer!" exclaimed Robert, with much energy. "He shall get his legacy—every penny of it! I'm only too glad my mother thought of him."

Although it had been understood between him and the lawyer that not a word should be said to any one, Robert had, as a matter of fact, told Cecil Sturges all about that unfortunate second will. But he had also—for he was delicate in such things—led Cecil to believe that he, Cecil, was in both wills, and so would have his ten thousand pounds in any case.

Sturges had been both touched and surprised to hear that Mrs. Singleton had remembered him so handsomely. It was the one moment that poor Robert had enjoyed that day—that moment when he had told his old friend about this pleasant legacy.

Cecil had come in last night, and again this morning, on his way to his office. It was then that Robert had asked him to come and have dinner with him to-night. Cecil had willingly assented, and it had been an agreeable little dinner, for the cook, who had survived from Mrs. Singleton's own old household, had remembered Robert's tastes, and had sent up the simple, toothsome dishes which he had always liked.

Dinner had been served as early as seven, the usual time in that house, where everything had been arranged for so many years to suit the health and the fancy of the old woman who was now lying dead upstairs.

And then, after the cloth had been removed, and during the short respite before Sturges had to leave for that other Government office where he was taking the place of a man who had gone off to the war, Robert suddenly spoke of Lilla. When he uttered her name, he was touched and startled by the change which came over his friend's face. For a moment it was convulsed with feeling, and Robert, surprised, exclaimed, "I say, Cecil, you knew—didn't you?"

And Cecil replied hurriedly, "Yes, of course I knew. In fact, she wrote and told me the same day that she wrote, I think, to one of your sisters."

There was a painful silence between the two men, and then Robert said in a low voice, "I suppose she was very lonely. Since we married—nearly twelve years ago now—we'd never been separated, excepting when she went to Paris that time with the Lark-Wrights."

And Cecil Sturges, speaking even more reluctantly than Singleton had done, answered, "Yes; I know that she felt lonely. I remember her telling me so. And then—well, Robert, I don't mind telling you that when

I got her letter I was very shocked and surprised. But I made up my mind that the awful Temple business had—had almost upset the poor girl's mind! It happened just about then, you know."

"As long ago as last autumn?" exclaimed Robert, startled.

Somehow he had thought that—that this extraordinary, unreal, second marriage of Lilla's had only taken place a few weeks ago—that's what he had understood his sister, Louisa, to say.

But the other was going on, though with obvious reluctance and unease: "Yes, it was in the very middle of that horrible business. In fact, I opened her letter while on my way to see Temple in prison—you know they refused bail? I was in a great hurry, and had to work the thing in during my luncheon hour, so I opened her letter in the taxi."

Robert looked at him sympathetically. "It must have been a bit of a jar," he muttered.

"It was—it was! Excepting, of course, you mustn't forget that we had all thought of you as dead for over a year."

"Have you kept the letter?" asked Robert. And his friend answered at once, "No. I tore it up in the cab. There was nothing in it. She simply thanked me because I'd done what I could for her after your —you know what——"

"Yes," said Robert Singleton hastily, "I know what you mean."

Cecil Sturges got up suddenly. "I'm afraid I must be going now," he said. "You see this sort of thing—I mean, the work I'm doing every night—doesn't improve my powers of sleep. The later I get there, the later I get back; and there's my work to-morrow morning to think of."

When they got to the front door—it was broad daylight still, owing to this new-fangled Summer-Time, to which neither man felt he would ever become accustomed—Sturges's host detained him for a moment: "Have you seen her since?" he asked hoarsely.

Somehow the fact that Lilla had been married to—to some one else for over six months was upsetting him and disturbing him dreadfully.

"No," said Sturges shortly. "No, I haven't seen her since. I believe Louisa has kept up with her—but no one else has, from here. We felt—I mean your mother and I felt—as if Lilla had cut herself off from us all, by what she had done." A sense of honesty compelled him to add, "I'm afraid your mother was glad rather than sorry, for, as you know, she never liked Lilla. Still, Mrs. Singleton behaved very well, in fact very kindly, so I thought. She offered to continue Lilla's allowance—but Lilla refused, as was, I think, to be expected."

Robert nodded. Yes, Lilla had always been a proud little thing. To go on receiving an allowance to which she had no right was what Lilla could never have brought herself to do. She would have starved first—he knew that!

After Robert Singleton had gone back into the dining-room there had come over him an awful feeling of desolateness and oppression.

For a while he wandered up and down the room; then rather shamefacedly he took out and cut a cigar, staring meditatively as he did so at what was still such a new luxury.

In the old days he had been a great smoker, but he had never smoked in this room. His mother hated the smell of smoke; it always made her feel sick, or so she said.

He had been smoking for about ten minutes, when a vehicle drew up before the front door, and he went across to the window and pulled up the blind with a certain eagerness. Perhaps it was Louisa—back at last!

Then he saw that it was a four-wheeled cab. Probably another of his mother's old contemporaries and friends—several of them had already called, and he had quite enjoyed his little chats with them. They had all thought it so touching, so wonderful, that he should have come home like that, just before dear Mrs. Singleton's death! And Robert had blessed his mother's reticence and dignity; not one of those old friends and acquaintances who had been there that day seemed to know of Lilla's second marriage.

So he looked with sympathetic curiosity at the small, frail figure of the old lady who was now being helped out of the cab by the driver. He did not remember having seen her before, but of course he might have done—any kind of infirmity alters people so much, and this old lady was very infirm.

He watched her slow progress across the pavement, and then he went himself out into the hall, to the front door, and opened it wide.

"Do come in," he said in a subdued tone. "Can I help you at all?"

And she answered at once: "No, I thank you. But

I should like to go to a room on the ground floor, if that is possible. Stairs are very difficult to me."

"About the cabman?" he began. And she said quickly, "I'm keeping him. I shall not stay long." Once she was in the dining-room, she said gently, "Would you have the kindness to shut the door? I presume I am speaking to Mr. Singleton?"

And he corrected her a little hastily, "Captain Singleton. Yes, I am Captain Singleton." He ventured to add, "And you——"?

"I am a friend of Lilla's—of your wife's, Captain Singleton—and she has asked me to come and see you."

He felt a violent shock—a commotion at the heart. But the little old lady was going on speaking, in that gentle, toneless, and yet very clear voice of hers.

"Will you forgive me if I stand? Sitting causes me considerable discomfort, and I have now been sitting for some hours, for I have only just arrived from Sussex."

Her words brought relief to his mind. Lilla had a large circle of relations whom he had never seen, scattered throughout the north of England—she even had relations in Scotland. The Gasparins were a great and important clan. This old lady must, of course, be one of them.

"Certainly," he said. "Pray do what is most agreeable and comfortable to you."

Neither spoke for some moments, and Robert, with surprise, saw that his visitor's lips were moving.

At last she said slowly, and as if choosing her words with great care, "My coming to you in this way would be an impertinence, Captain Singleton, were it not that in the last few months I have become so closely attached to Lilla as to feel for her as if she were indeed a beloved child. I never had a daughter, and Lilla has taken a daughter's place in my heart."

She saw the watchful face of the man who was standing opposite to her soften, and she went on more firmly: "So it is for Lilla's sake I have come—especially and above all for Lilla's sake. I want you to believe me when I tell you that in what I am going to say to you I am only moved by the thought of Lilla, and of what is best for Lilla."

"Yes, I quite understand that," he said briefly. He added, with an effort, "I'm grateful to you for your affection for Lilla. I was always sorry, in the old days, that my wife's mother had died so prematurely."

But his visitor did not seem to have heard these last words, for she went on: "I need hardly tell you that Lilla is a very sensitive, a very"—she hesitated for a word, and at last an old-fashioned word came to her—"a very modest young woman," she said, "and I know that you must feel with me that it would be difficult to imagine a more untoward thing than this which has happened to the poor child——"

"You mean her second marriage," said Robert Singleton in a low, uncomfortable voice.

This was the first time that he had really faced Lilla's position in the whole horrible business. Till now he had only thought of it as it affected himself.

Mrs. Carteret looked at him fixedly. "Yes, that is what I do mean. It was not a thing which I imagine those who knew Lilla before I knew her would have expected her to do."

These words, these wise, measured, kindly words, found an instant echo in Robert Singleton's sore heart.

"Every one was amazed——" he muttered. "Amazed! A friend who has just left me tells me he could hardly believe it——"

"But unfortunately, Captain Singleton, this surprising thing did come to pass—and so we cannot expect Lilla to be as if it had not happened. When I left her three hours ago"—her voice shook a little for the first time—"I left a very unhappy woman."

"I can well understand that," he said in a low, grieved voice, "unhappy, and ashamed too, I expect, poor little thing."

Those words he had just uttered seemed to give him an opening for saying something which he longed to say.

"I wish you'd tell her," he exclaimed rather breathlessly, "that though I can't pretend to understand exactly why she did such—such a very extraordinary thing, I do realise that she was terribly lonely, and that, after all, it did probably seem, at the time, a reasonable thing to do."

He felt that nothing in the world would induce him to refer, even remotely, to the man—the man who——

But what was this Lilla's old friend was now saying?

"I will give her your kind message, Captain Singleton,—and that really brings me to what I have come to say. I want you to do a very unselfish thing——" She looked up into his worn, and now unhappy, face, very earnestly. "I want you to allow Lilla to go back, for a time, to the life she led during the first year of what she believed to be her widowhood. I want to assure you very solemnly, on my honour and my faith as a Christian woman, that your best, indeed, some would say your only, chance of happiness, in your renewed married life, will depend on your giving Lilla time to forget, as far as may be, all that has happened."

She spoke with extraordinary energy and solemnity, her former careful choice of words and of phrases being, for the moment, thrown to the winds.

Robert Singleton was startled. "I don't quite understand what you mean!" he exclaimed. "Do you mean that you want me to let her go away and live by herself again? My sister tells me that she lived alone during that first winter and summer."

"Yes, I do mean that. I beg—nay, I implore you for your own sake, as well as for that of Lilla, to let her give herself up, for a while at any rate, to some form of strenuous war work."

"War work?" he echoed, bewildered. "I don't know what you mean.—How can a *woman* do war work?"

"Almost all the women of England are doing war work now," said Mrs. Carteret a little wearily. She felt as if her strength were giving out. But she also knew she was very near her goal. It would not do to give way now.

"It's wonderful, Captain Singleton! Our girls are in hospitals and in munition works; and the older women, in many cases, are doing the work of the men who have gone out to fight for them. Lilla, the winter before last, had charge of a big canteen in a munition factory. She did splendid work there, and even this winter she has kept up her connection with the place, for she has charge of the savings bank there. The war, believe me, could not go on very long unless the women of England were able also to do war work——"

He stared at her, amazed.

"Just before I left England," he muttered, "all the talk was still of suffragettes—those women who had disgraced themselves, Mrs.——"

He waited a moment, but she did not supply his omission; instead, she hurried on with the words: "Those same women, those very women who, you say, disgraced themselves, have been doing splendid things!"—her eyes gleamed, a little colour came into her pale cheeks.

And then, as he said nothing, still too surprised, too bewildered, to speak, she went on, in a far gentler, quieter tone:

"But let us now think of Lilla—only of our dear Lilla, Captain Singleton? I will tell you what I should *like* to do, if I can obtain your assent to my plan. I should like to get Lilla right away—if possible to France. There's a great call in France for English ladies knowing French as well as Lilla knows it. The work would be hard, but really interesting, and it would make a complete break with the life she has now been leading—a break with associations which I am sure she will try to forget——" the speaker's voice became nearly inaudible.

Robert Singleton's face was crossed with an involuntary frown of pain. "Couldn't she stay with you?" he asked. "I mean during the time that I shall be away in Flanders? Somehow I can't bear to think of *my* wife doing hard work."

"Believe me, Captain Singleton," she spoke very persuasively and feelingly, "believe me, hard work will be far the best, nay, the only thing for Lilla! Also,"—she stopped speaking for a moment, and even the man now gazing down at her, absorbed as he was in himself, saw the look of suffering which was ever in the speaker's face deepen—"I unhappily have to count myself among those associations which those who love your wife must wish her to look back upon as belonging to a part of her life it will now be her duty to forget. So once more I do beg you, very earnestly, to give her time for this forgetfulness to grow. I ask it for her sake—but I also ask it for your own."

"How long do you think she ought to be away, doing this hard work in France?" he asked slowly. "To me it seems such an odd, unnecessary idea——"

"How long?" repeated Mrs. Carteret, mechanically; she was beginning to feel not only very tired, but faint also. "I should like to say till the end of the war. I believe, at least I think I understood, that you're going to rejoin your regiment very soon."

"Yes," he said. "Yes, that's true. And if I consent to do what you ask—the sooner I go back the better!" He added abruptly, "I suppose I may see Lilla before I go away? I feel I *ought* to see her. It isn't that I doubt what you say, but I feel I ought to hear her tell me that she agrees to this—this separation."

"Certainly," said Mrs. Carteret quickly. "I agree that it is your right to see her." She would have given the world to be able to add, "But do not insist, now, upon your right." But with her instinctive knowledge of the human heart, there came to her the intuition that she had done much better than she could have hoped to do, not only for Lilla, but for the unfortunate man who stood there before her, looking down at her with an expression which had now become troubled and distrustful.

"Where and when can I see her?" he asked abruptly.

And after a moment's thought Mrs. Carteret answered, "She is now with her cousin, Mrs. Gasparin, whom I expect you know."

He nodded, impatiently.

"There will be no difficulty in arranging a meeting. I suppose you would not wish her to come here?"

"Oh, no, not here!" he said hastily; then added, "And I think she would prefer that it should not be at Appledean."

Mrs. Carteret felt a sudden sense of relief. He had quicker perceptions than she had credited him with, these last difficult minutes. "I think you had better meet in London. It will be easy to arrange a time and place," she said.

"And when do you propose that this plan of Lilla's going to France shall begin?" he asked.

She answered at once, "As soon as possible, Captain Singleton. If I had my way, I should send her to France to-morrow. But of course it will take some days to arrange. I hope to settle it while I am here, in town."

After Robert Singleton had helped his visitor very carefully, almost tenderly, into the four-wheeler, he came back into the dining-room and went over to the window.

He saw the cabman take out a piece of paper, on which his unknown friend—for so he realised her to be—had evidently put the address to which she wished to be driven.

What a curious, singular woman was this woman who had just left him! He almost forgot she was old and infirm. He had been like wax in her hands,—yet he didn't even know her name! That she cared deeply for Lilla he could not doubt.

The poor fellow sighed—a long, painful, involuntary sigh. If only his mother had cared for Lilla as this old woman cared, what a much happier married life Lilla would have had to look back to! She would surely have stayed on, in that case, at Number 19,—not have gone out into the world alone to meet with so untoward and shocking an adventure.

CHAPTER XX

WHEN Mrs. Carteret drove past the Houses of Parliament, the dial of Big Ben marked half-past nine; but twilight had only just begun to drape the great buildings of Westminster with its shroud of black and grey, and when the four-wheeled cab drew up before the door which gave access to Carteret's dwelling, the street lamps were only just being lit.

A woman blessed or cursed with imagination is always longing to see the actual physical setting of her beloved. Mrs. Carteret had longed intensely to see the little house in Westminster into which she now made so sad and lonely an entry. Her son had described it to her in his first glow of pleasure in its temporary possession, and since it had become, in a much closer sense, his home, he and Lilla had both been at some pains to make her understand what a curious, delightful sort of place it was.

During the last few months they had gradually added many pretty things to those which had been hastily acquired by Carteret during the fortnight preceding his marriage. But the sight, the perception of all that would have made Mrs. Carteret so happy yesterday, now brought only poignant pain. And as she made her way slowly up the low, shallow staircase which yet was so easy—easier far than her own staircase at Baycombe—the tears welled up again into her tired eyes.

She had asked the woman-servant to precede her, and looking up she saw her waiting on the square panelled landing.

It was a tiny landing, but as is almost always the case in a very old house, it had an air of space and of dignity.

"I have prepared Mrs. Carteret's room, ma'am. But if Mr. Carteret comes back early in the morning, as he does do sometimes, you mustn't be startled to see him come through it, for in these queer old houses there are no passages—one room just leads into the other. I told Mr. Carteret, when the other people's furniture was moved out, that he would find it useful to have a third bedroom, but he's a very determined gentleman, and he said, 'No, not yet.' So there are only those two bedrooms—just his, and his good lady's,—furnished, in the house."

She opened one of the two panelled doors that gave on the landing, and Mrs. Carteret passed through into a room which appeared, owing to its harmonious proportions, and to the fact that the panelling was painted pale grey, larger than it really was. Also, what furniture there was in that peaceful-looking bed-chamber was diminutive and delicate-looking, so matching the beloved woman for whose occupation it had been prepared.

The bed was a small, rather low four-post bed, its arched canopy supported by four slender, fluted columns of dark walnut-wood.

Carteret had bought that pretty bed at a sale held in a Suffolk manor-house whither a fortunate chance had brought him just after his happy return from Baycombe, last October. The curtains and the canopy were of old cream-coloured calendered linen, over which there meandered a pattern of small deep-pink flowers.

There were two walnut-wood chests of drawers in the room. One of them served as a dressing-table, and behind it was fixed an oval eighteenth-century mirror, still with the dim, hand-silvered glass which sends back kinder reflections than do the bright, unwinking looking-glasses of our modern day.

Three small armchairs, painted with garlands of flowers, had come from the same room in the Suffolk manor as had the bed; and the flat, faded, red silk cushions, with which their cane seats were covered, exactly matched the colouring of the deep-pink flowers covering the calendered furnishings of the four-post bed.

Laid on the grey-brown felt which covered all the floor, was a long strip of Persian carpet, the sight of which brought back all sorts of memories to Mrs. Carteret, for that strip of carpet had been in her son's nursery at Damascus.

After the woman had helped the lady whom she knew to be Mr. Carteret's mother to undress, she observed, a little awkwardly, "I'd offer to stay here the night, but you see there's no room for me and my husband! I suppose you'll be all right, ma'am? We're almost sure Mr. Carteret'll be here early in the morning, so you won't be alone for long."

And Mrs. Carteret answered gently, "I shall be quite comfortable, thank you. Even if there was a room, I should not require you to stay."

She listened to the coming and going of the couple downstairs, their passing out of the latched front door, and so across the yard and up the covered passage.

The street door banged behind them, and she was alone—alone as she had not been for forty years, for it was forty years ago since Mrs. Carteret had last spent a night in an empty house. It was at Damascus, before Dare was born, and she remembered the thrill, the feeling of adventure, which the experience had given her. Also, she remembered how angry her husband had been when he had come back the next day, and found what had happened.

And now, during all the earlier part of that warm May night, Mrs. Carteret lay wide awake. The stillness seemed unnatural, greater even than at Baycombe, for every church tower in Westminster had been silenced, lest the bells should serve as guide to the Zeppelins. Now and again, however, there rose the long drawn-out eerie cry of a syren hooting on the river which flowed, darkly and swiftly, so near to the little house. Also, at long intervals, she heard what sounded like ghostly footfalls hurrying across the empty space which lay to the right of the small group of buildings, for on that side there were no intervening houses to deaden sound, only low walls, and miniature gardens.

At last she fell into a doze of exhaustion, and in time the doze became deep slumber.

Her body was still asleep when her brain awoke to certain sounds—of a motor coming round the corner and abruptly stopping; of a door being opened and then shut very quietly; of footsteps hastening across the courtyard just below the two windows of the room in which she lay—and then of the house-door being unlatched, and quick steps striding up the low, wooden stairs outside.

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Mrs. Carteret was conscious of a great longing to remain asleep, but, as the door of the room opened, she awoke—to see her son standing by the side of her, of Lilla's, bed.

He was still wearing the long cloak in which he had come off the boat at the docks, and he stared down at her with a terrible look of fear and of astonishment, on his astonished face.

"Mum!" he exclaimed. "What's the matter? Why are you here? What has happened to Lilla?"

And she answered him at once, looking up straight into his anxious, tired eyes. "Nothing has happened to Lilla, Dare,—nothing, that is, of what you might have feared. But oh, my dear—my heart's darling—something very terrible has happened to the poor child—for her husband, Robert Singleton, was not killed. He is alive, and in London, now."

"And she—where is *she?*"

Amazement, fierce anguish, and a terrible revolt, all seemed to struggle for utterance in those five words he said.

And Mrs. Carteret painfully raised herself on her elbow, and answered quickly, "She's at Baycombe alone—or rather, with Mabel Gasparin."

He breathed a long, deep, involuntary sigh of relief.

"No one can force her to go back to him," he muttered.

And as his mother remained silent Carteret said it again, in a louder, more determined voice, "No one can force her to go back to him. Only a very cruel person would expect her to do so!" He threw a challenging look down at the woman now looking dumbly up at him from the bed. "The law—I mean the English marriage law—will have to be altered to meet such a case as this. There are likely to be many such between now and the end of this war."

Then he took a few steps up and down the room, and came back again to his mother.

"I don't suppose that even that man, stupid as I understand him always to have been, if what Mabel Gasparin says is true, will expect—expect——" he did not finish the sentence.

And Mrs. Carteret, in a low voice, said, "Yes, Dare, he does expect it. I saw him last night. But oh, my boy, don't look like that! She is not going back to him—now."

"Now?" he said. "What d'you mean by now, Mum? She will never go back to him—not at any rate while I'm alive to prevent it!"

And as, once more, Mrs. Carteret said nothing, he muttered, "Thank God she's not a Catholic!" And then he said violently, "Why don't you speak, Mum? Why don't you say something? Can't you see how you're torturing me?"

And Mrs. Carteret did speak, in a trembling voice. "I don't know what to say to you, Dare. It is true that Lilla is not a Catholic, but she looks at the matter as a Catholic woman should do—at least, she seemed to do so when I left her yesterday."

In a fierce, low voice, he exclaimed, "I can't give her up! I warn you, Mum, that I'll do my best, my very best, to keep her——" and Mrs. Carteret's heart quailed before the inimical, alien look bent down on her.

She closed her eyes, and a sudden glimmer of the anguish his mother was feeling came to Carteret, and with that glimmer, the conviction, the knowledge, that he was to lose Lilla, pierced his heart.

He came down heavily on his knees, and the bed was shaken by his hard, difficult sobs.

His mother turned herself over, and put out her feeble, infirm right arm.

"Dare!" she whispered. "Oh, Dare, my darling, don't cry like that!" She hadn't seen him cry since he was a boy of fourteen, when a dog he loved had been killed.

At last he got up.

"Tell me," he said hoarsely, "what you think must be done? What is she thinking of doing? God knows, I don't want to do anything to hurt her! But I'll make no promises—I reserve my complete freedom of action."

Six hours later Carteret saw his mother off to Sussex. They had spent all the morning together; she had even waited outside, in his car, during the hour he had spent in his office, giving in a verbal report on the work he had gone to do abroad.

But when he came back he did not tell her what it would have been so great a relief to her burdened heart to hear—what the last words to and from his chief had been: "You know that job that I was offered last week? Is it still open to me to accept it?" "Certainly it's still open—but you understand that it might easily mean your being absent from England for nine to ten weeks?" And Carteret shook his head impatiently. "I know that!" he exclaimed. "But I think I'd like to put in for it,—if I may." Then he had turned on his heel, without saying another word. And the older man had felt a little uneasy. Carteret looked ill to-day—ill and queer. In fact, the expression of his face reminded his chief of a lad who was very near to his heart, and who had just come back from the Front with bad "shell shock."

When there had been offered to him this last week a job which most men in Carteret's position would have regarded as a signal honour, he had said that, though of course he was ready to take it if he was considered the only person who could do it properly, he would much prefer to be excused. And he had added, with an odd look, a look which in any other man might have been called sheepish, "You see I'm married now! And this sort of business, even if it *is* an honour and all that sort of thing, doesn't appeal to me as it would have done last year."

And to-day Carteret's chief wondered if Carteret and his very attractive little wife had had a tiff! Then, just as he was wondering whether this was so, the door opened—and in walked Carteret again. "Perhaps I ought to explain," he said shortly, "that my wife's going abroad, to France for at least three months, to help run a canteen—" and then he had gone as quickly as he had come.

The older man shook his head. Women never know when they are well off! Why couldn't Mrs. Carteret stay quietly in London, and do what, after all, was *her* war job, at home? Carteret was a most valuable man. It was far more important that Carteret should be happy, and his mind at ease, than that a limited number of Tommies should be made even more luxuriously comfortable, in a material sense, than they were at present!

But women can never see a thing like that,—and again the older man shook his head.

From the office Carteret had driven his mother to Knightsbridge, and then it had been his turn to wait outside while she had gone into the London headquarters of the French Red Cross.

There she had made a provisional arrangement for Lilla with the courteous, quick-witted French lady whose far from easy business it was to choose candidates for the Anglo-French canteens, which were organised, not for the benefit of British soldiers, as Carteret's chief had supposed, but for that of the French *Piou-pious.*

After that they had motored right out to Richmond Park, and she had tried to soothe his sore, miserable heart, as only a mother, making use of the whole strength and science of her love, could have found the courage to try. And at the very last, when they were very near the station, he uttered almost the same words that Robert Singleton had uttered: "Of course I must see Lilla before she goes to France! It isn't that I don't trust you, Mum—but I must hear from herself that this is really what she wishes to do."

And Mrs. Carteret answered, "Yes, Dare, if you really wish it—if you insist upon it—you shall of course see Lilla."

At once he had exclaimed, "I do wish it—I do insist upon it!"

And now Carteret was driving out of the station, not knowing quite where to go, or what to do. He felt like a man who has received a mortal blow, but whose physical sensations are still numbed.

Among the letters which he had found awaiting him on his return home, and which he had at last reluctantly opened after the breakfast shared with his mother, there had been one from a young fellow named Travers, who, having been one of his best, quickest, most intelligent helpers in the first weeks of the war, had later become a soldier.

Jack Travers had come in to see Mr. and Mrs. Dare Carteret the evening before Carteret had left for Holland this last time, and the story he had come to tell had been very piteous.

He had been engaged, before the war, to a girl who, when he went out to the front, had gone to nurse in a hospital. Some months ago, so he now told Carteret and Lilla in the simple, bald way in which people tell such tragic things, she had met with an accident in the lift of the hospital where she worked, and now she was paralysed, from the waist downwards.

As an exclamation of horror had escaped from Lilla's lips, the poor young fellow had turned to her, and said, "Yes, it seems rough luck, doesn't it, that I should come through all right,—and that this should happen to *her?* And I hope, Mrs. Carteret, that you'll understand—that you won't be shocked, as some people are—when I tell you that I've come home to marry her. Girls are doing that sort of thing all the time—I mean that they're marrying men who've been maimed and blinded. So why shouldn't it be the other way about? She was doing her bit, too——"

And after he had gone away, the two left behind, fortunate Carteret and happy Lilla, had gone on talk-

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ing in low, troubled accents about poor Jack Travers, —and Lilla had said, very decidedly for her, "I can't understand the girl letting him do this thing; I think it's very wrong of her." And he had answered quickly, "That *is* unfair! Supposing such an accident had happened to you, *we* should have married just the same." But she had shaken her head. "No," she had said, "no, indeed we shouldn't! I would have had as much of your dear company as you were inclined to give me—but I would never, never have tied you to a half-dead woman."

And then he had suddenly leant forward and taken her into his arms, holding her to him tight, tight,—as if he were half afraid that the other man's icy blast of misfortune might envelop and make them, too, cold.

And this poor boy, whose wedding was to take place in a week from now, had asked him to look him up at lunch time to-day, and now Carteret made up his mind that he would go.

But there was still an hour—an hour of solitary, anguished thought—to put in, before then.

Driving very slowly, he turned off Victoria Street, and stopped his car in Ambrosden Avenue, near the side door of the great Catholic Cathedral.

He got out of the car, and walked through the door. Here at any rate he could sit and think, secure from interruption, alone with his rebellious, hungry, unhappy heart.

The vast, shadowed fane was less empty than he had expected to find it on a week-day, and he became aware that a requiem mass was being said at the high altar. So he turned into a bare, half-finished, side chapel.

Several women were kneeling there—worn, weary-looking women of the working class. Carteret contemplated them with a kind of sad, envious impatience. He could almost see into their simple hearts, almost hear them praying, humbly, hopefully, believingly, for the sons and husbands who were away, fighting. They were fortunate folk,—their sorrows and anxieties were natural, uncomplicated.

No thinking, intelligent man reaches the age which Carteret had reached before he met Lilla, without having come to certain very definite conclusions as to life, and the moral conduct of life. It was his misfortune that, unlike most of the men about him, he did not believe in compromise. He had a fierce, intellectual contempt for those who try to make the best of both worlds.

As for the relation of man to woman, Carteret had met, when in the flush of his eager, virile youth, with what some people might consider a fortunate, and others a most unfortunate, experience. He had been the secret lover, not over months but over years, of a married woman, and that experience had convinced him that duty and inclination, so far as he was concerned, were never likely to go together.

In one thing Carteret had been happier than he knew, for the bond between him and his secret love had been broken by death. That had been eight years ago. And till he met Lilla he had not again felt even a fugitive desire to enter into any permanent tie with a woman.

And Lilla—such had been her power over him—had obliterated from his heart, and even from his memory, the dead woman. But now, in this terrible hour, his lost love began reasserting herself, imperiously. Long forgotten incidents and episodes connected with their friendship, crowded in on his mind, and he even recalled how bitterly she had felt their frequent partings, their long separations, and he was sorrier for her now than he had been then. . . .

He had always taken the full blame of the affair, accepting it at the time, and since, with a certain harsh honesty. And as he sat there, staring before him in the bare grey and black chapel, the thought became insistent that now had come the punishment meted out by a just God for that forgotten sin.

In vain he told himself that this was but a morbid fancy, not fair to the God in whose greatness and mercy he believed. Still, deep in his heart, the agonising belief was there. "Who breaks pays," Carteret had always thought that the truest of proverbs.

In the past he had broken—broken in a very deep and real sense—a woman's life, as well as a woman's conscience. What more natural than that his punishment should come through his other, greater love, and be shared by her, as the innocent must always share the punishment of those they love in the way that Lilla loved him, Carteret?

At last he got up from the bench on which he had been sitting so long, plunged in bitter, agonising thought, and went into the nave of the cathedral. There he wandered about uncertainly for a little while. Finally he stood still, and, with arms crossed, stared unseeingly before him.

One of the cathedral vergers had been observing him for some time, for he took Carteret for one of those tourists whose visits to the cathedral are not supposed to be made while any service is in progress.

Coming up a little nervously, this man touched the tall stranger on the arm: "Please, sir——" he began. But Carteret turned on him furiously. "Go to hell!" he exclaimed. And the man, falling back a step, muttered, apologetically, "I beg your pardon—I didn't know you were a Catholic, sir!"

CHAPTER XXI

IT was nearly a fortnight later, and Lilla was standing at the window of a private sitting-room in the Westminster Palace Hotel.

She felt a clinging, intimate love for every stone of the buildings she saw before her—Big Ben, St. Margaret's, the noble mass of Westminster Abbey—the very sky above them seemed to be more her dear stretch of sky than any other sky under which she had ever lived and had her being.

Close by, to the right, was the grey arch leading into Dean's Yard. Through that arch she had walked hundreds of times in the last seven months, for it led to, and from, the remote, hidden little house where she and Carteret had been so happy.

She was leaving England to-night, for how long she did not know,—but she knew that when she came back everything in her life would be changed, and that, as far as was possible, she would have to avoid this part of London.

The door of the hotel sitting-room opened, and Lilla, turning, started nervously. But it was only Mabel Gasparin.

They met in the middle of the room, and then Mabel said slowly, in that rather hoarse, strained voice of hers, more hoarse, more strained, than usual, this afternoon, "Robert's come. He's waiting downstairs. You told me you wanted me to come and tell you."

Lilla said at once, "Will you ask them to show him up?"

"You're sure you'd rather I went away—you're sure you would rather I wasn't there?"

"I'd rather you were there," she said painfully. "But it wouldn't be fair—to him."

As Mabel shut the door behind her, Lilla sat down on an old-fashioned round ottoman.

She felt as if she would fall if she went on standing,—and yet, when the door opened, she stood up.

She was trying desperately to remember what Mrs. Carteret had told her to say. Mrs. Carteret had begged her to thank Robert for his kindness in letting her go to France, to do war work. He had only consented to do so very reluctantly. . . .

But when he walked forward into the room, looking so broken and so old, so utterly different from the man from whom she had parted, two years ago this next August, the shrinking, sick fear of him which had possessed her during this last hour of agonised waiting, was merged in sudden concern and pity.

"Oh, Robert!" she said, feelingly. And then again, "Oh, Robert, I'm so sorry——"

Once more she stopped short, for in the days that seemed to belong to another life Robert Singleton had always hated being ill, and he had prided himself on his good, sound health. So she fortunately misunderstood the purport of his answer to her faltering words—words which he on his side had accepted as an expression of sorrow, of remorse for what she had done.

"We won't go into all that——" was what he said.

Robert also had thought over what he meant to say, and, unlike Lilla, he managed to get it out at once. "I want to forget what—what happened altogether. We both *will* forget it—after a while."

He was staring down at her, with a painful, searching, eager glance, trying to see if she "looked different."

And then his face softened.

To his mind Lilla was not at all altered. She looked exactly the same—if anything, younger and prettier than when he had left her,—though he noticed that she was very pale, and that there were dark rings round her eyes, as though her last night had been sleepless.

They sat down, side by side, and, timidly, he took her hand. She let it rest in his, and that made him vaguely glad. She surely understood that he had forgiven her?

"That old friend of yours," he began, "didn't want me to see you before you went away. Of course I knew that's what she meant—though she didn't actually say so. But I felt sure *you* would like to see me, Lilla. Why, we mayn't meet again for months!" As she said nothing, he went on, a thought dismayed by her silence: "You really *did* mean all that you wrote to me in that letter ten days ago?"

"Yes," said Lilla, but her voice shook a little, "I meant every word of it, Robert. I'm very, very grateful to you for letting me go to France."

"It seems a queer thing to do just now——"

"Oh, no, it isn't"—she tried to smile at him. "A great many English women are doing it."

"I suppose you wouldn't like me to come and see you off to-night?"

She answered rather quickly, "Oh, no, Robert—please not! I mean, if you don't mind. You see, I'm taking charge of three young ladies."

"Oh, all right—never mind! I quite understand. You'll give me your address, won't you? You won't mind my writing to you?"

In spite of that soft little ringless hand which lay in his, he was beginning to feel that Lilla was altered, after all.

But again she answered at once, and again she said, "Oh no." Then, after a moment, she went on: "Of course I shan't mind. I shall be glad, Robert, to have your letters." And as she said the lying words she looked down into her lap where lay her other hand—the hand which still belonged to her, which he had not yet touched.

He said, "You'll be behind the French part of the line, won't you?"

And she answered, "Quite near to Paris, I believe. Of course one has to go where one's sent. I don't expect to see any of the fighting."

"I'm glad of that!" and he drew a long breath.

It was she who next broke the silence. "You'll give my love to Louisa," she said. "Somehow I didn't feel as if I wanted to see her to-day,—but I've become so fond of Louisa, Robert. She was very good to me after you went away."

He took a bulky note-case out of one of his pockets. "Look here," he said, "I've brought you some money, Lilla. Fifty pounds in French notes." He saw the colour flame up into her face. "You don't mind taking it, do you?" he asked, surprised and disappointed.

She answered quickly, "No, not at all! It's very good of you to have thought of it, Robert. Mabel said I ought to have some French money. She meant to get me some at the station."

He went on, "I'm going to arrange to have the same amount remitted to you every month by Mr. Boucher. I think you'll want it, my dear, out there. Of course you can spend it just as you feel you want to do. Those poor French chaps aren't as well looked after as our fellows."

And she was touched,—so touched that the tears came into her eyes. Robert had always been very thoughtful and generous about money; in that he was unlike the other Singletons.

Again there was a long silence between them. And then, at last, he let go of her hand. "Well," he said heavily, "there's nothing more to be said now, is there? I expect you've a lot still to do, if you only came up from Appledean this morning."

He stood up, and she stood up, too.

Lilla could see quite clearly into Robert's heart. She could see that he was wondering if she was going to kiss him—and in a flash she made up her mind that she would kiss him. But before she did that she had something to tell him. Perhaps the hearing of it might make him no longer anxious to kiss her.

"Robert," she said falteringly, "Robert, there's something I must tell you—something that I'm afraid will grieve you."

"Yes?" he said shortly. "What is it, Lilla?"

"I'm going to become a Roman Catholic."

"Are you?" and then he sighed. "Of course I'm

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sorry—I can't help being sorry. It seems to me that it will separate us even more than we are separated now."

"I promise you that it shall not do that!"

"I don't see how you can help it," he said, dismally.

Eagerly she exclaimed, "Of course I can help it. Oh, Robert, try and not mind!"

He answered dully, "I'll try and mind as little as I can. I know that there are good people among Roman Catholics. The Austrian who rescued me, and sheltered me all that time in Belgium, was one. But he was not what I call a moral man, Lilla——"

"Wasn't he?" she said nervously. "I'm sorry." And then very piteously she exclaimed, "I can't *bear* your being grieved about it, Robert!"

For the first time, he smiled. Somehow it was as if the old Lilla had come back and said those words. And more cheerfully he exclaimed, "All right. I'll try to get used to the idea."

And then she put up her face, just as a child would have done, just as in old days she had so often put up her face for him to kiss it, when they were going to be parted for a few hours.

He bent down awkwardly, and just brushed her lips with his. "Good-bye," he said huskily. "Good-bye, my dear."

Then he walked quickly to the door, and was gone, leaving her in a sudden passion of tears.

But she quickly dried her eyes, and when Mabel Gasparin came in a few minutes later she was quite calm. "He was very kind," she said, turning away her face. "And somehow—well, it went off better than I thought it could do. But he's so altered, Mabel! He looks so much older. It made my heart ache."

And Mabel choked down the words which rose to her lips, an expression of the hope that had possessed her with a sort of terrible possession this last fortnight, the hope that poor Robert Singleton would go out and be killed—killed instead of some man who had love, as well as life, before him.

And then Mabel was startled and, yes, frightened, by Lilla's next words, for, "I'm going to see Dare now," she said very quietly. "I know that I wrote and told him that I did not wish to see him—that it would be better not. But now I feel I can't go away without having seen him."

She waited a moment, and then added, "If it's a wicked thing to do, then it's the last wicked thing I ever shall do."

And as Mabel Gasparin remained silent, she said reproachfully, "Why, you yourself said, Mabel, that you thought I ought to see him?"

And Mabel replied reluctantly, "Yes—I did think so. But aren't you afraid that he may think that—that you——" and as Lilla looked at her without understanding—"that you have changed your mind? That you mean to go back to him?" she said desperately.

Lilla waited a moment. "No, he won't think that." Then she said slowly, "If he's not there, I'll take it as a sign that I'm not to see him,—and I won't wait for him. It's so near," she went on piteously, "only a few yards from here, Mabel. If there were no houses between, and if he were standing in our courtyard, I could see him from that window."

She was putting on her hat and coat as she spoke, then she came close up to her cousin. "Go and do the shopping we meant to do together," she whispered. "Don't stay here, waiting for me. I shall go on to the Cathedral from there. Promise you'll go out?"

And Mabel exclaimed, "Yes, I promise I'll go out!" And then she said impulsively, "If Dare isn't there, do wait for him a while——"

And Lilla, looking at her rather strangely, said, "Yes—yes, perhaps I will wait a little while. It isn't as if I were ever going to see him again. It's my last chance, Mabel."

But Lilla had no occasion to wait, for it was Carteret himself who opened the door at the end of the passage giving on the street.

It was almost as if he had been waiting for her there.

As she came through, he shut the door, and, taking her into his arms, held her, unresisting, close to his heart, for a long time.

But at last he let her go, and they walked through together, into the courtyard.

"I thought you'd come," he said, and there was a strain of triumph, as well as of deep yearning, in his voice. "But I wouldn't open the door and watch—for, Lilla, it would have been so—so awful to be disappointed."

She could not speak, and he went on a little breathlessly. "There's no one here—thanks be to God for that! I'm going away, too, to-night, and I wanted to spend the last hours alone. I shan't come back here, Lilla—I'll get rooms in my old place, in Down Street."

He had made no mistake. And Lilla felt now as she had felt on their marriage night—as if they had but one heart-beat between them.

During those ten days which she had just spent nursing Mrs. Carteret at Baycombe, she had spoken to Dare twice a day on the telephone. They had not said much, but it had made each of them feel as if they were still in touch with one another—in touch as disembodied spirits might be.

Their longest, most intimate conversation had been when the first news—the false, bad news—of the Battle of Jutland had first come through. Then Carteret had said, "I mind—of course I do mind—but this only seems a part of the great storm which has darkened all my sky."

He opened the door of what had been their home, and they walked through together into the house.

There was a good deal of luggage piled up in the little hall. "Are you going away for a long time?" she said, and there was a quivering sense of relief in the tone in which she asked the question. "I had no idea that you were going away for as long as that!"

And he answered, instinctively lowering his voice, "I couldn't tell you over the telephone, for it's being kept an absolute secret."

And then he told her where he was going, and what he was going to do there.

She asked eagerly, "Isn't it a great honour, Dare?"

And he answered, indifferently, "Yes, I suppose it is." Then, as he saw a troubled look come over her face, and heard her say, as if to herself, "But it's a long sea voyage"—he said quickly, "It's safer than

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Holland, my dearest—in fact there's no danger attached to *this* expedition at all!"

He muttered under his breath, "I wish there were! Often I wish to God there were!"

Lilla turned into the little dining-room, and from there into the sitting-room where they had spent so many, many happy hours working and talking, idle and silent, together.

Then she went on into the kitchen, and the scullery beyond, and he knew then that she was saying good-bye to everything.

"Are you going upstairs?" he asked abruptly.

And she said, "Yes, if you don't mind, Dare."

"I don't mind. But, Lilla, I have a confession to make to you——"

And she turned on him rather quickly. "Yes?" she said. "What d'you mean, Dare?"

"You'll see," he said; and then again, "You'll see—I'll tell you upstairs."

Together they went up the shallow stairs, and he opened the door of the room which had been her room. And then Lilla gave a cry,—for the room was empty, only the grey-brown felt on the floor remained, of all that had been there.

She turned on him in keen distress. "Oh, Dare! Where's my bed—and the dressing-table—and the dear little chairs?"

And he said sombrely, "I gave them to that poor wretch, Jack Travers. They are all in the flat he's taken for his wife. They're there now, having their honeymoon. I've been a good deal with them this last week." He went on, in a low voice, "Somehow I've got quite accustomed, Lilla, to seeing the poor girl lying in your bed. Travers goes back next week. He believes he's going to be killed in the Great Push that's coming."

She turned, and clung to him for a moment. "I wish you'd told me! You know I should have been glad—not sorry, Dare."

And he muttered: "Somehow I couldn't tell you. But I'm glad you know now."

Lilla did not go on into his room, as he expected her to do. Instead, she turned away, and went downstairs.

There the sight of his luggage made her think again of his coming journey. "At what time do you start?" she asked.

He answered hastily, "Oh, not for another hour. If I leave here a little after seven it will be ample time."

And then she said, in a very low voice, "Then perhaps you will come with me to the cathedral, Dare. I'm going to be 'received' there, in the crypt, at six."

She did not look up at him as she spoke. She knew the conflicting emotions which the words she had just uttered would and must arouse in his sore heart.

But all he said was, "How glad Mum must be!"

"Yes, she is glad. But I only told her last night. The Abbot arranged everything."

They said good-bye under the low canopy of leaves, some of which almost touched the windows of what had been her room.

Then Lilla turned and laid her soft lips against the grey bark of the plane tree in a passion of farewell.

It seemed so unnatural to know that other women's feet would tread their way to love across this enclosed space—that other lovers would stand, heart to heart, where she and Dare had often so stood together for a moment, before going into the house.

As they passed out into the street they saw, by the clock on the old Georgian church, that it was ten minutes to six. They had plenty of time to walk to the cathedral through the back streets of Westminster. And as they made their way there, saying very little but remembering much, each of them felt curiously comforted, and at peace.

EPILOGUE

EPILOGUE

DRESSED in the dignified, severely simple dark blue uniform, and close, nun-like cap and veil, of the French canteen worker, Lilla Singleton came out of the parish church of Bougival—in pre-war days the gayest of Seine-side boating towns within easy reach of Paris.

It was a grand old church, built by the English in the thirteenth century, and it stood on a kind of stone-paved platform set above the steep main street of the town.

Lilla had been one of the first to pass through the great door which had been thrown open in honour of a number of children—tiny children they looked in her eyes—who, with herself, had that day made their First Communion. And now she walked forward, across the stone pavement, and stood for a while by the iron railings which bounded the kind of forecourt in front of the church.

It was a curious throng which had streamed out behind Lilla into the bright sunshine—little girls in white muslin, with quaint, ugly wreaths of artificial flowers crowning their dark, glossy heads, looking like the miniature brides of the little boys, each of whom had a white rosette pinned to his coat. There were also many wounded soldiers in the congregation, and a mass of women, every one of them, whatever her age or condition, dressed in deep mourning. Indeed, the blackness of all the feminine attire was in pathetic, significant contrast to the white gala dresses of the little girls, and the faded blue uniforms and old red trousers of the soldiers.

To-day was Wednesday, the seventh of June, and Lilla had arrived at Bougival late on the Monday night. But perhaps because every waking hour, after her long, tiring, and exciting journey, had been filled with business of various kinds connected with the work she and her three companions had come to do here, it seemed to her as if æons of time had gone by since she had parted from Carteret.

It was now half-past eight, and early though French folk are, Lilla had been told, perchance in deference to English ways, that this morning, at any rate, she need not start her labours till half-past nine.

The canteen, which though so near Paris was a rest camp, or *dépôt d'éclopés,* for the men now fighting at Verdun, had been established in the empty shops of some quicklime works situated just above the town, close to a beautiful chestnut grove.

It only took about a quarter of an hour to walk there, and "Madame la Directrice," as she was already learning to hear herself called, was in no haste to go back to the orphanage where had been established the English ladies' sleeping quarters.

Her heart was very full of varying emotions, and she felt it an immeasurable comfort to be there, even if for only a few minutes, quite alone with herself.

All yesterday, and especially all last night and this morning, even in church, Lilla had felt as if Dare Carteret were with her,—sharing her new experiences, comforting her ignorance, sympathising with the admiration, now rising like a flowing tide within her heart, for this gallant, stricken country of France.

She knew that her curious sensation of nearness to the man whom she must now set herself to forget, as much as it was possible for her to do so, was but a fantasy. Nay, more! She had even tried to tell herself that it was unlikely that he, on his side, was with her in thought just now, for Carteret was part of a very distinguished company—no woman among them—and going through experiences which perforce must distract and occupy his mind. Yet, even so, that curious sensation persisted. She had felt as if he were there, with her, kneeling at the altar rail.

She looked down musingly at the still unfamiliar scene before her. At the street which stretched steeply up to the left, till it became merged in a country road bordered with closely-shuttered villas set in lovely, blooming gardens,—and then she glanced to her right, down towards the river, which was now, like all other waterways in France, a war-way, playing its part in the great defensive combat which was being carried on by the whole nation.

The shops of the town were open, and as she had passed by on her way to church, she had seen the shop-women, some of them very old women, taking down the heavy wooden shutters, and arranging their wares, as is the French way, out in the open air.

On all the faces, young and old, of the women coming and going down there in the street, she saw the same look of endurance, and of suffering gravity. But that peculiar, sombre expression of face, which seemed common to all civilian France, was lacking in the wounded soldiers. They looked, and indeed they were, gay and light-hearted, already wearing—and that was true even of the most crippled among them—the exultant air of victory. Lilla's *éclopés* were all from Verdun, and most of them were going back there, in a very few days.

Since her arrival at Bougival, Lilla had had the most to do with a certain Madame Dubois, an elderly lady who seemed to be the head of all the charitable works in the town.

Madame Dubois had been exceedingly kind—what the French call *serviable*—to the four Englishwomen who had come to take charge of the canteen, and Lilla had meant to get up early and go to six o'clock mass with her. But she had overslept herself, dreaming vivid, reminiscent dreams, till one of her new friends had awakened her, at seven o'clock.

As she gazed down into the sunny street which was still very empty, for the good folk coming out of the church were lingering, talking eagerly at the top of their voices, as has always been the immemorial habit in France on a Feast Day, Lilla saw a poodle whose woolly fleece had been dyed bright yellow, by way of advertisement of a dyer's and cleaner's shop, come dancing across the road below.

For the first time since she had been in Bougival, a bright smile came over the onlooker's face—the dog looked at once so happy and so absurd! They had first seen the ridiculous-looking creature the day before, and she now remembered one of her fellow workers' indignation at the sight, and her exclamation: "Such a thing would *never* be allowed in England!"

And then Lilla's small face, looking all the smaller and younger under its prim blue bonnet, and the white band resting on her fair hair, became grave. She had already come to realise that one of her tasks, and not an easy one, would be to make her canteen ladies understand that all sorts of extraordinary things went on in France which would "never be allowed in England," and yet which were perhaps none the worse for that!

As she turned away, rather regretfully, to go down the steep steps which led from the paved space where she had been standing into the street below, she saw Madame Dubois' tall, black-clad figure hurrying towards her.

The Frenchwoman held open in her hand a copy of the Paris *Daily Mail,* and tears were rolling down her face.

A feeling of sheer terror came over Lilla. She divined that some awful misfortune had befallen her country, even before she heard the breathless words: "Hélas! Madame la Directrice, je vous apporte une terrible nouvelle. Votre grand Kitchinaire—lui qui s'est battu pour la France en 1870—est mort—noyé!"

But Lilla did not really understand—the meaning of the words did not penetrate her brain—till she herself saw the announcement printed in large letters:

LORD KITCHENER DROWNED.
VISIT TO RUSSIA AT THE TSAR'S REQUEST.
H.M.S. HAMPSHIRE SUNK WITH ALL ON BOARD.

With all on board? The words seemed to sear themselves into Lilla's brain, and cut themselves across Lilla's heart. . . .

Madame Dubois was astonished at the quietude with which the English lady took the awful, the overwhelming news.

"Je vais prier un petit moment pour l'âme de notre grand ami," she said a little reproachfully; and, still speechless, Lilla turned, and went with her into the church.

Together they knelt down, the Frenchwoman and the Englishwoman, side by side, and for the "little moment" which was all either of them could spare out of their crowded morning, they prayed, each in her own language, each with great fervour, for the soul of the great Lord Kitchener, as also for the souls of all the other brave Englishmen who had gone down with him to their death.

THE END

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